

LIVELIHOOD
DRAMATIC REVERIES

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON





LIVELIHOOD



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LIVELIHOOD

DRAMATIC REVERIES

BY

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

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TO AUDREY

AUDREY, these men and women I have known
I have brought together in a book for you,
So that my child some day when she is grown
May know the friendly folk her father knew.

Wondering how fathers can be so absurd,
Perhaps you'll take it idly from the shelves,
And, reading, hear, as once I overheard,
These men and women talking to themselves ;

And so find out how they faced life and earned,
As you one day must earn, a livelihood,
And how, in spite of everything, they learned
To take their luck through life and find it good.

And, maybe, as you share each hope and fear,
And all the secrets that they never told,
For their sake you'll forgive your father, dear,
Almost for being so absurd and old.

And may it somewhat help to make amends
To think that, in their sorrow and their mirth,
Such men and women were your father's friends
In old incredible days before your birth.

THE OLD NAIL-SHOP, 1916.

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NOTE

MOST of the poems in this volume were imagined, and the greater number of them written, before August 1914; but the War has inevitably modified my original conception of the series as a whole. "Between the Lines" is restored to its place by kind leave of Mr. Elkin Mathews, the publisher of my small volume, *Battle*, in which it was first printed.

W. W. G.

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PRELUDE

THE OLD NAIL-SHOP

I DREAMT of wings—and waked to hear
Through the low-sloping ceiling clear
The nesting starlings flutter and scratch
Among the rafters of the thatch,
Not twenty inches from my head ;
And lay, half dreaming in my bed,
Watching the far elms—bolt-upright,
Black towers of silence in a night
Of stars—between the window-sill
And the low-hung eaves, square-framed, until
I drowsed, and must have slept a wink . . .
And wakened to a ceaseless clink
Of hammers ringing on the air . . .
And, somehow, only half aware,
I'd risen and crept down the stair,
Bewildered by strange, smoky gloom,
Until I'd reached the living-room
That once had been a nail-shop shed.
And where my hearth had blazed, instead
I saw the nail-forge glowing red ;

And, through the stife and smoky glare,
Three dreaming women standing there
With hammers beating red-hot wire
On tinkling anvils, by the fire,
To ten-a-penny nails ; and heard—
Though none looked up or breathed a word—
The song each heart sang to the tune
Of hammers, through a summer's noon,
When they had wrought in that red glow,
Alive, a hundred years ago—
The song of girl and wife and crone,
Sung in the heart of each alone . . .

The dim-eyed crone with nodding head—
“He's dead ; and I'll, too, soon be dead.”

The grave-eyed mother, gaunt with need—
“Another little mouth to feed !”

The black-eyed girl, with eyes alight—
“I'll wear the yellow beads to-night.”

THE SHAFT

HE must have lost his way, somehow.

'Twould seem

He'd taken the wrong turning, back a bit,

After his lamp. . . . Or was it all a dream

That he'd nigh reached the cage—his new
lamp lit

And swinging in his hand, and whistling, glad

To think the shift was over—when he'd
tripped

And stumbled, like the daft, club-footed lad

His mother called him ; and his lamp had
slipped

And smashed to smithereens, and left him
there

In pitchy dark, half-stunned, and with barked
shins ?

He'd cursed his luck ; although he didn't care,

Not overmuch : you suffered for your sins :

And, anyway, he must be nigh the shaft ;

And he could fumble his way out somehow,

If he were last, and none came by. 'Twas
daft

To do a trick like thon.

And even now
His mother would be waiting. How she'd
laugh
To hear about it! She was always game
For fun, she was, and such a one for chaff—
A fellow had no chance. But 'twas the same
With women always: you could never tell
What they'd be at, or after saying next:
They'd such queer, tricky tongues; and it
was well
For men to let them talk when they were
vexed—
Although, his mother, she was seldom cross.
But she'd be wondering, now, ay, that she
would—
Hands folded in her apron, at a loss
To know what kept him, even now she stood,
Biting her lips, he'd warrant. She aye bit
Her lips till they were white when things
went wrong.
She'd never liked his taking to the pit,
After his father'd . . . Ay, and what a song
She'd make . . . and supper cold! It must
be late.
The last on the last shift! After to-day
The pit was being laid idle! Jack, his mate,
Had left him, tidying—hurrying away
To back. . . . And no night-shift. . . .
If that cursed lamp
Had not gone out. . . . But that was hours
ago—

How many hours he couldn't tell. The
cramp
Was in his thighs. And what could a lad
know
Who'd crawled for hours upon his hands and
knees
Through miles on miles of hot, black, drip-
ping night
Of low-roofed, unfamiliar galleries?
He'd give a hundred pound to stand upright
And stretch his legs a moment: but, somehow,
He'd never reached a refuge, though he'd felt
The walls on either hand. He'd bumped his
brow
Till he was dizzy. And the heat would melt
The marrow in his bones. And yet he'd gone
A dozen miles at least, and hadn't found
Even a crossway. On and on and on
He'd crawled and crawled; and never caught
a sound
Save water dripping, dripping, or the creak
Of settling coal. If he could only hear
His own voice even; but he dared not speak
Above a whisper. . . .
There was naught to fear;
And he was not afraid of aught, not he!
He would come on a shaft before he knew—
He couldn't miss. The longest gallery
Must end somewhere or other; though 'twas
true
He hadn't guessed the drift could be so long.

If he had not come straight. . . . If he had
turned,
Unknowing, in the dark. . . . If he'd gone
wrong
Once, then why not a dozen times! It burned
His very heart to tinder, just to think
That he, maybe, was crawling round and
round
And round and round, and hadn't caught a
blink
Of light at all, or hadn't heard a sound. . . .
'Twas queer, gey queer. . . .

Or was he going daft,
And only dreaming he was underground
In some black pit of hell, without a shaft—
Just one long gallery that wound and wound,
Where he must crawl for ever with the drip
Of lukewarm water drumming on his back. . . .

'Twas nightmare, surely, had him in its grip.
His head was like to split, his spine to
crack. . . .

If he could only call, his mother'd come
And shake him; and he'd find himself in
bed. . . .

She'd joke his fright away. . . . But he was
dumb,

And couldn't shout to save himself. . . .
His head

Seemed full of water, dripping, dripping,
dripping. . . .

And he, somehow, inside it—huge and dark
His own skull soared above him. . . . He
 kept slipping,
And clutching at the crumbling walls. . . .
 A spark
Flared suddenly ; and to a blood-red blaze
His head was bursting ; and the pain would
 break. . . .

'Twas solid coal he'd run against, adaze—
Coal, sure enough. And he was broad awake,
And crawling still through that unending
 drift
Of some old working, long disused. He'd
 known
That there were such. If he could only lift
His head a moment ; but the roof of stone
Crushed low upon him. A gey narrow seam
He must be in—and bad to work : no doubt
That's why 'twas given up. He'd like to
 scream,
His cut knees hurt so sorely ; but a shout
Might bring the crumbling roof down on his
 head
And squash him flat.

 If he could only creep
Between the cool, white sheets of his own bed,
And turn towards the wall, and sleep and
 sleep—
And dream, maybe, of pigeons soaring high,
Turning and tumbling in the morning light,

With wings ashimmer in a cloudless sky.
He'd give the world to see a bonnie flight
Of his own pigeons rise with flapping wings,
Soaring and sweeping almost out of sight,
Till he was dizzy, watching the mad things
Tossing and tumbling at that dazzling height.
Ay, and his homers, too—if they'd come in,
He hoped his mother'd fed them. They
 would be
Fair famished after such a flight, and thin.

But she would feed them, sure enough ; for
 she
Liked pigeons too—would stand there at
 the door
With arms akimbo, staring at the blue,
Her black eyes shining as she watched them
 soar,
Without a word, till they were out of view.
And how she laughed to hear them scold and
 pout,
Ruffle and fuss—like menfolk, she would say:
Nobody knowing what 'twas all about,
And least of all themselves. That was her
 way,
To joke and laugh the tantrums out of him.
He'd tie his neckerchief before the glass ;
And she'd call him her pigeon, Peter Prim,
Preening himself, she'd say, to meet his lass—
Though he'd no lass, not he ! A scarf well
 tied,

No gaudy colours, just a red or yellow,
Was what he fancied. What harm if he tried
To keep himself respectable ! A fellow—
Though womenfolk might laugh and
laugh. . . .

And now
He wondered if he'd hear her laugh again,
With hands on hips and sparkling eyes. His
brow
Seemed clamped with red-hot iron bands ; and
pain
Shot red-hot needles through his legs—his
back,

A raw and aching spine that bore the strain
Of all the earth above him : the dead black
Unending clammy night blinding his brain
To a black blankness shot with scarlet streaks
Of searing lightning ; and he scarcely knew
If he'd been crawling hours, or days, or
weeks. . . .

And now the lightning glimmered faintly
blue,
And gradually the blackness paled to grey :
And somewhere, far ahead, he caught the
gleam
Of light, daylight, the very light of day,
Day, dazzling day !

Thank God, it was no dream.
He felt a cooler air upon his face ;
And scrambling madly for some moments
more,

Though centuries it seemed, he reached the
place
Where through the chinks of the old crumb-
ling door
Of a disused upcast-shaft, grey ghostly light
Strained feebly, though it seemed the sun's
own blaze
To eyes so long accustomed to the night
And peering blindly through that pitchy maze.

The door dropped from its hinges — and
upright
He stood, at last, bewildered and adaze,
In a strange dazzling world of flowering
white.
Plumed snowy fronds and delicate downy
sprays,
Fantastic as the feathery work of frost,
Drooped round him from the wet walls of
the shaft—
A monstrous growth of mould, huge mould.
And lost
In wonder he stood gaping ; and then laughed
To see that living beauty—quietly
He laughed to see it : and awhile forgot
All danger. He would tell his mother : she
Would scarce know whether to believe or
not,—
But laugh to hear how, when he came on it,
It dazzled him. If she could only see
That fluffy white—come on it from the pit,

Snow-white as fantails' feathers, suddenly
As he had, she'd laugh too : she . . .
Icy cold
Shot shuddering through him, as he stept
beneath
A trickle. He looked up. That monstrous
mould
Frightened him ; and he stood with chatter-
ing teeth,
Seeming to feel it growing over him
Already, shutting out the fleck of sky
That up the slimy shaft gleamed far and dim.
'Twould flourish on his bones when he should
lie
Forgotten in the shaft. Its clammy breath
Was choking him already. He would die,
And no one know how he'd come by his
death. . . .
Dank, cold mould growing slowly. By
and by
'Twould cover him ; and not a soul to
tell. . . .

With a wild cry he tried to scramble out,
Clutching the wall. . . . Mould covered
him. . . . He fell,
As, close at hand, there came an answering
shout.

IN THE ORCHESTRA

HE'D played each night for months, and
never heard

A single tinkly tune, or caught a word
Of all the silly songs and sillier jests ;
And he'd seen nothing, even in the rests,
Of that huge audience piled from floor to
ceiling

Whose stacked white faces sent his dazed
wits reeling. . . .

He'd been too happy, and had other things
To think of while he scraped his fiddle-
strings. . . .

But now, he'd nothing left to think about—
Nothing he dared to think of. . . .

In and out

The hollow fiddle of his head the notes
Jingled and jangled ; and the raucous throats
Of every star rasped jibes into his ear,—
Each separate syllable, precise and clear,
As though 'twere life or death if he should
miss

A single cackle, crow or quack, or hiss

Of cockadoodling fools. . . .

A week ago
He'd sat beside her bed, and heard her low
Dear voice talk softly of her hopes and fears—
Their hopes and fears ; and every afternoon
He'd watched her lying there. . . .

A fat buffoon
In crimson trousers prancing, strut and
cluck—

Cackling : " A fellow never knows his luck.
He never knows his luck. He never knows
His luck." . . . And in and out the old gag
goes

Of either ear, and in and out again,
Playing at " You-can't-catch-me " through
his brain—

" 'Er knows his luck." . . .

How well they thought they knew
Their luck, and such a short while since,
they two

Together. Life was lucky : and 'twas good
Then to be fiddling for a livelihood—
His livelihood and hers. . . .

A woman sang
With grinning teeth. The whole house
rocked and rang.

In the whole house there was no empty place :
And there were grinning teeth in every face
Of all those faces, grinning, tier on tier,
From orchestra to ceiling chandelier,
That caught in every prism a grinning light,

As from the little black box up a height
The changing limelight streamed down on
the stage.

And he was filled with reasonless, dull rage
To see those grinning teeth, those grinning
rows ;

And wondered if those lips would never close,
But gape for ever through an endless night,
Grinning and mowing in the green limelight.

And now they seemed to grin in mockery
Of him ; and then, as he turned suddenly
To face them, flaming, it was his own face
That mowed and grinned at him from every
place—

Grimacing on him with the set, white grin
Of his own misery through that dazzling
din. . . .

Yet, all the while he hadn't raised his head,
But fiddled, fiddled for his daily bread,
His livelihood—no longer hers. . . .

And now
He heard no more the racket and the row,
Nor saw the aching, glittering glare, nor smelt
The smother of hot breaths and smoke—but
felt

A wet wind on his face. . . .

He sails again
Home with her up the river in the rain—
Leaving the grey domes and grey colonnades
Of Greenwich in their wake as daylight fades—

By huge, dark, cavernous wharves with flaring
lights,
Warehouses built for some mad London
night's
Fantastic entertainment—grimmer far
Than Baghdad dreamt of—monstrous and
bizarre,
They loom against the night, and seem to
hold
Preposterous secrets horrible and old
Behind black doors and windows.

Yet even they
Make magic with more mystery the way,
As, hand in hand, they sail through the blue
gloom
Up the old river of enchantment, home. . . .

He heard strange, strangled voices—he, alone
Once more—like voices through the tele-
phone,
Thin and unreal, inarticulate
Twanging and clucking at terrific rate—
Pattering, pattering. . . .

And again aware
He grew of all the racket and the glare,
Aware again of the antic strut and cluck—
And there was poor old "Never-know-his-
luck"
Doing another turn—yet, not a smile,
Although he'd changed his trousers and his
style.

The same old trousers and the same old
wheeze
Was what the audience liked. He tried to
please,
And knew he failed : and suddenly turned
old
Before those circling faces glum and cold—
A fat old man with cracked voice piping
thin,
Trying to make those wooden faces grin,
With frantic kicks and desperate wagging
head,
To win the applause that meant his daily
bread—
Gagging and prancing for a livelihood,
His daily bread. . . .

God ! how he understood !
He'd fiddled for their livelihood—for her,
And for the one who never came. . . .

A stir

Upon the stage ; and now another turn—
The old star guttered out, too old to burn.
And he remembered she had liked the chap
When she'd been there that night. He'd
seen her clap,
Laughing so merrily. She liked it all—
The razzle-dazzle of the music-hall—
And laughing faces . . . said she liked to
see
Hard-working people laughing heartily
After the day's work. She liked everything—

His playing, even! Snap . . . another
string—

The third!

And she'd been happy in that place,
Seeing a friendly face in every face.

That was her way—the whole world was her
friend.

And she'd been happy, happy to the end,
As happy as the day was long.

And he
Fiddled on, dreaming of her quietly.

THE SWING

'Twas jolly, swinging through the air,
With young Dick Garland sitting there
Tugging the rope with might and main,
His round face flushed, his arms astrain,
His laughing blue eyes shining bright,
As they went swinging through the light—
As they went swinging, ever higher,
Until it seemed that they came nigher
At every swing to the blue sky—
Until it seemed that by and by
The boat would suddenly swing through
That sunny dazzle of clear blue—
And they, together. . . .

Yesterday
She'd hardly thought she'd get away :
The mistress was that cross, and she
Had only told her after tea
That ere she left she must set to
And turn the parlour out. She knew,
Ay, well enough, that it meant more
Than two hours' work. And so at four
She'd risen this morn, and done it all

Before her mistress went to call
And batter at her bedroom door
At six to rouse her. Such a floor,
So hard to sweep ; and all that brass
To polish ! Any other lass
But her would have thrown up the place,
And told the mistress to her face. . . .

But how could she ! Her money meant
So much to them at home. 'Twas spent
So quickly, though so hard to earn.
She'd got to keep her place, and learn
To hold her tongue. Though it was hard,
The little house in Skinner's Yard
Must be kept going. She would rob
The bairns if she should lose her job,
And they'd go hungry. . . .

Since the night
They'd brought home father, cold and white,
Upon a stretcher, mother and she
Had had to struggle ceaselessly
To keep a home together at all.
'Twas lucky she was big and tall
And such a strong lass for fifteen.
She couldn't think where they'd have been
If she'd not earned enough to feed
And help to keep the bairns from need—
Those five young hungry mouths. . . .

And she

For one long day beside the sea
Was having a rare holiday. . . .

'Twas queer that Dick should want to pay
So much good money, hardly earned,
To bring her with him. . . .

How it burned,
That blazing sun in the blue sky!
And it was good to swing so high—
So high into the burning blue,
Until it seemed they'd swing right through. . . .

And good just to be sitting there
And watching Dick with tumbled hair
And his red neck-tie floating free
Against the blue of sky and sea,
As up and down and up and down,
Beyond the low roofs of the town,
They swung and swung. . . .

And he was glad
To pay for her, the foolish lad,
And happy to be swinging there
With her, and rushing through the air,
So high into the burning blue,
It seemed that they would swing right
through. . . .

'Twas well that she had caught the train,
She'd had to run with might and main
To catch it: and Dick waiting there
With tickets ready. . . .

How his hair
Shone in the sunshine, and the light

Made his blue laughing eyes so bright
Whenever he looked up at her. . . .

She'd like to sit and never stir
Again out of that easy seat—
With no more mats to shake and beat,
And no more floors to sweep, no stairs
To scrub, and no more heavy chairs
To move—for she was sleepy now. . . .

Dick's hair had fallen over his brow
Into his eyes. He shook them free,
And laughed to her. 'Twas queer that he
Should think it worth his while to pay
And give her such a holiday. . . .

But she was sleepy now. 'Twas rare
As they were rushing through the air
To see Dick's blue eyes shining bright
As they went swinging through the light,
As they went swinging ever higher
Until it seemed that they came nigher
At every swing to that blue sky—
Until it seemed that by and by
Their boat would suddenly swing through
That sunny dazzle of clear blue. . . .

If she could swing for evermore
With Dick above that golden shore,
With no more parlour floors to sweep—
If she could only swing and sleep . . .

And wake to see Dick's eyes burn bright,
To see them laughing with delight
As suddenly they swung right through
That sunny dazzle of clear blue—
And they two sailing on together
For ever through that shining weather !

THE DROVE-ROAD

'Twas going to snow—'twas snowing! Curse
his luck!

And fifteen mile to travel—here was he
With nothing but an empty pipe to suck,
And half a flask of rum—but that would be
More welcome later on. He'd had a drink
Before he left; and that would keep him warm
A tidy while: and 'twould be good to think
He'd something to fall back on if the storm
Should come to much. You never knew
with snow.

A sup of rain he didn't mind at all,
But snow was different with so far to go—
Full fifteen mile, and not a house of call.
Ay, snow was quite another story, quite—
Snow on these fell-tops with a north-east wind
Behind it, blowing steadily with a bite
That made you feel that you were stript and
skinned.

And those poor beasts—and they just off the
boat

A day or so, and hardly used to land—

Still dizzy with the sea, their wits afloat.
When they first reached the dock, they scarce
 could stand,
They'd been so joggled. It's gey bad to cross,
After a long day's jolting in the train,
Thon Irish Channel, always pitch and toss—
And heads or tails, not much for them to gain!
And then the market, and the throng and noise
Of yapping dogs : and they stung mad with
 fear,
Welted with switches by those senseless boys—
He'd like to dust their jackets! But 'twas
 queer,
A beast's life, when you came to think of it
From start to finish—queerer, ay, a lot
Than any man's, and chancier a good bit.
With his ash-sapling at their heels they'd got
To travel before night those fifteen miles
Of hard fell-road, against the driving snow,
Half-blinded, on and on. He thought at
 whiles
'Twas just as well for them they couldn't
 know. . . .

Though, as for that, 'twas little that he knew
Himself what was in store for him. He took
Things as they came. 'Twas all a man
 could do ;
And he'd kept going, somehow, by hook or
 crook.
And here he was, with fifteen mile of fell,

And snow, and . . . God, but it was blowing stiff!

And no tobacco. Blest if he could tell
Where he had lost it—but for half a whiff
He'd swop the very jacket off his back—
Not that he'd miss the cobweb of old shreds
That held the holes together.

Thon Cheap-Jack
Who'd sold it him had said it was Lord Ted's,
And London cut. But Teddy had grown fat
Since he'd been made an alderman. . . . His
bid?

And did the gentleman not want a hat
To go with it, a topper? If he did,
Here was the very . . .

Hell, but it was cold :
And driving dark it was—nigh dark as night.
He'd almost think he must be getting old
To feel the wind so. And long out of sight
The beasts had trotted. Well, what odds!

The way
Ran straight for ten miles on, and they'd go
straight.

They'd never heed a by-road. Many a day
He'd had to trudge on, trusting them to fate,
And always found them safe. They scamper
fast,

But in the end a man could walk them down.
They're showy trotters ; but they cannot last.
He'd race the fastest beast for half-a-crown
On a day's journey. Beasts were never made

For steady travelling : drive them twenty mile
And they were done, while he was not afraid
To tackle twice that distance with a smile.

But not a day like this ! He'd never felt
A wind with such an edge. 'Twas like the
blade

Of the rasper in the pocket of his belt
He kept for easy shaving. In his trade
You'd oft to make your toilet under a dyke—
And he was always one for a clean chin,
And carried soap.

He'd never felt the like—
That wind, it cut clean through him to the
skin.

He might be mother-naked, walking bare,
For all the use his clothes were, with the snow
Half-blinding him, and clagging to his hair,
And trickling down his spine. He'd like to
know

What was the sense of pegging steadily,
Chilled to the marrow, after a daft herd
Of draggled beasts he couldn't even see !

But that was him all over ! Just a word,
A nod, a wink, the price of half-and-half—
And he'd be setting out for God-knows-
where,

With no more notion than a yearling calf
Where he would find himself when he got
there.

And he'd been travelling hard on sixty year
The same old road, the same old giddy gait ;
And he'd be walking, for a pint of beer,
Into his coffin, one day, soon or late—
But not with such a tempest in his teeth,
Half-blinded and half-dothered, that he
 hoped !

He'd met a sight of weather on the heath,
But this beat all.

'Twas worse than when he'd groped
His way that evening down the Mallerstang—
Thon was a blizzard, thon—and he was done,
And almost dropping when he came a bang
Against a house—slap-bang, and like to
 stun !—

Though that just saved his senses—and right
 there

He saw a lighted window he'd not seen,
Although he'd nearly staggered through its
 glare

Into a goodwife's kitchen, where she'd been
Baking hot girdlecakes upon the peat.
And he could taste them now and feel the glow
Of steady, aching, tingly, drowsy heat
As he sat there and let the caking snow
Melt off his boots, staining the sanded floor.
And that brown jug she took down from the
 shelf—

And every time he'd finished, fetching more,
And piping : “ Now reach up and help
 yourself ! ”

She was a wonder, thon, the gay old wife—
But no such luck this journey. Things like
that

Could hardly happen every day of life,
Or no one would be dying but the fat
And oily undertakers, starved to death
For want of custom. . . . Hell! but he
would soon

Be giving them a job. . . . It caught your
breath,

That throttling wind. And it was not yet
noon ;

And he'd be travelling through it until dark.
Dark! 'Twas already dark, and might be
night

For all that he could see. . . .

And not a spark
Of comfort for him! Just to strike a light
And press the kindling shag down in the
bowl,

Keeping the flame well shielded by his hand,
And puff and puff! He'd give his very soul
For half a pipe. He couldn't understand
How he had come to lose it. He'd the rum—
Ay, that was safe enough : but it would keep
Awhile, you never knew what chance might
come

In such a storm. . . .

If he could only sleep . . .
If he could only sleep. . . . That rustling
sound

Of drifting snow, it made him sleepy-like—
Drowsy and dizzy, dithering round and
round. . . .

If he could only curl up under a dyke
And sleep and sleep. . . . It dazzled him,
that white,

Drifting and drifting, round and round and
round. . . .

Just half-a-moment's snooze. . . . He'd be
all right.

It made his head quite dizzy, that dry sound
Of rustling snow. It made his head go
round—

That rustling in his ears . . . and drifting,
drifting. . . .

If he could only sleep . . . he would sleep
sound. . . .

God, he was nearly gone !

The storm was lifting ;
And he'd run into something soft and warm—
Slap into his own beasts, and never knew.

Huddled they were, bamboozled by the
storm—

And little wonder either when it blew
A blasted blizzard. Still, they'd got to go.
They couldn't stand there snoozing until
night.

But they were sniffing something in the snow.
'Twas that had stopped them, something big
and white—

A bundle—nay, a woman . . . and she
slept.

But it was death to sleep.

He'd nearly dropt
Asleep himself. 'Twas well that he had kept
That rum ; and lucky that the beasts had
stopt.

Ay, it was well that he had kept the rum.
He liked his drink : but he had never cared
For soaking by himself, and sitting mum.
Even the best rum tasted better, shared.

THE ROCK-LIGHT

AY, he must keep his mind clear—must not
think

Of those two lying dead or he'd go mad.

The glitter on the lenses made him blink ;

The brass glared speckless : work was all he
had

To keep his mind clear. He must keep it
clear

And free of fancies now that there was none,

None left but him to light the lantern—near

On fourteen hours yet till that blazing sun

Should drop into that quiet oily sea,

And he must light . . . though it was not
his turn :

'Twas Jacob's,—Jacob, lying quietly

Upon his bed. . . . And yet the light would
burn

And flash across the darkness just as though

Nothing had happened, white and innocent,

As if Jake's hand had lit it. None would
know,

No seaman steering by it, what it meant

To him since he'd seen Jacob. . . .

But that way
Lay madness. He, at least, must keep his
wits ;
Or there'd be none to tell why those two
lay . . .

He must keep working or he'd go to bits.

Ere sunset he must wind the lantern up.
He'd like to wind it now—but 'twould go
round,
And he'd be fancying. . . . Neither bite
nor sup
He'd touched this morning ; and the clicking
sound
Would set his light head fancying. . . .
Jacob wound
So madly that last time before . . . But he,
He mustn't think of Jacob. He was bound,
In duty bound, to keep his own wits free
And clear of fancies.

He would think of home.
That thought would keep him whole when
all else failed—
The green door ; and the doorstep, white as
foam ;
The window that blazed bright the night he
sailed
Out of the moonlit harbour,—clean and gay
'Twould shine this morning in the sun, with
white

Dimity curtains and a grand display
Of red geraniums, glowing in the light.
He always liked geraniums : such a red—
It put a heart in you. His mother, too,
She liked . . .

And she'd be lying still in bed,
And never dreaming ! If she only knew !
But he, . . . he mustn't think of them just
now—

Must keep off fancies. . . .

She'd be lying there,
Sleeping so quietly—her smooth white brow
So calm beneath the wisps of silver hair
Slipped out beneath her mutch-frills. She
had pride

In those fine caps, and ironed them herself.
The very morning that his father'd died,
Drowned in the harbour, turning to the shelf
She took her iron down, without a word,
And ironed, with her husband lying
dead . . .

As they were lying now. . . . He never
heard

Her speak or saw her look towards the bed.
She ironed, ironed. He had thought it
queer—

The little shivering lad perched in his chair,
And hungry—though he dared not speak for
fear

His father'd wake, and with wet streaming
hair

Should rise up from the bed. . . .

He'd thought it strange
Then, but he understood now, understood.
You'd got to work or let your fancies range ;
And fancies played the devil when they could.
They got the upper hand if you loosed grip
A moment. Iron frills, or polish brass
To keep a hold upon yourself, not slip
As Jacob slipt. . . .

A very burning-glass
Those lenses were. He'd have to drop off
soon
And find another job to fill the morn,
And keep him going through the afternoon—
And it was not yet five ! . . .

Ay, he was born
In the very bed where still his mother slept,
And where his father'd lain—a cupboard bed
Let in the wall, more like a bunk, and kept
Decent with curtains drawn from foot to head
By day, though why—but 'twas the women's
way :

They always liked things tidy. They were
right—

Better to keep things tidy through the day
Or there would be the devil's mess by night.
He liked things shipshape, too, himself. He
took

After his mother in more ways than one.
He'd say this for her—she could never brook
A sloven ; and she'd made a tidy son.

'Twas well for him that he was tidy, now
That he was left ; or how'd he ever keep
His thoughts in hand. . . . The Lord alone
knew how
He'd keep them tidy, till . . .

Yet, she could sleep :
And he was glad, ay, glad that she slept sound.
It did him good, to think of her so still ;
It kept his thoughts from running round and
round
Like Jacob in the lighted lantern, till . . .
God ! they were breaking loose ! He must
keep hold. . . .

On one side, "Albert Edward, Prince of
Wales,"
Framed in cut cork, painted to look like
gold—

On the other a red frigate, with white sails
Bellying, and a blue pennon fluttering free,
Upon a sea dead calm. He couldn't think,
As a wee lad, how ever this could be ;
And when he'd asked, his father with a wink
Had only answered, laughing : Little chaps
Might think they knew a lot, and had sharp
eyes ;

But only pigs could see the wind. Perhaps
The painter'd no pig by him to advise.

That was his father's way : he'd always jest,
And chuckle in his beard, with eyes half-shut

And twinkling . . . Strange to think of
them at rest

And lightless, those blue eyes, beneath that
cut

Where the jagged rock had gashed his brow
—the day

His wife kept ironing those snowy frills,
To keep herself from thinking how he lay,
And wouldn't jest again. It's that that
kills—

The thinking over. . . .

Jacob jested too :

He'd always some new game, was full of chaff.

The very morn before the lantern drew . . .

Yesterday morn that was, he heard him
laugh. . . .

Yesterday morn ! And was it just last night
He'd wakened, startled, and run out, to
find

Jacob within the lantern, round the light

Fluttering like a moth, naked and blind

And laughing . . . Peter staring, turned to
stone . . .

The struggle . . . Peter killed . . .

And he must keep

His mind clear at all costs, himself alone

On that grey naked rock of the great deep,

Full forty mile from shore—where there
were men

Alive and breathing at this moment—ay,

Men deep in easy slumber even then,
Who yet would waken and look on the sky.

He must keep his mind clear, to light the
lamp

Ere sunset : ay, and clear the long night
through

To tell how they had died. He mustn't
scamp

The truth — and yet 'twas little that he
knew . . .

What had come over Jacob in the night
To send him mad and stripping himself
bare . . .

And how he'd ever climbed into the light—
And it revolving . . . and the heat and
glare !

No wonder he'd gone blind — the lenses
burning

And blazing round him ; and in each he'd see
A little naked self . . . and turning, turning,
Till, blinded, scorched, and laughing fiend-
ishly,

He'd dropped : and Peter . . . Peter might
have known

The truth, if he had lived to tell the tale—
But Peter'd tripped . . . and he was left
alone. . . .

Just thirty hours till he should see the sail
Bringing them food and letters—food for them;

Letters from home for them . . . and here
was he

Shuddering like a boat from stern to stem
When a wave takes it broadside suddenly.
He must keep his mind clear. . . .

His mother lay
Peacefully slumbering. And she, poor soul,
Had kept her mind clear, ironing that day—
Had kept her wits about her, sound and
whole—

And for his sake. Ay, where would he have
been

If she had let her fancies have their way
That morning, having seen what she had
seen !

He'd thought it queer. . . . But it was no
child's play

Keeping the upper hand of your own wits.
He knew that now. If only for her sake
He mustn't let his fancies champ their bits
Until they foamed. . . . He must jam on
the brake

Or he . . .

He must think how his mother slept;
How soon she would be getting out of bed ;
Would dress ; and breakfast by the window,
kept

So lively with geraniums blazing red ;
Would open the green door, and wash the
stone,

Foam-white enough already ; then, maybe,

She'd take her iron down, and, all alone,
Would iron, iron, iron steadily—
Keeping her fancies quiet, till he came. . . .

To-morrow he'd be home: he'd see the
 white
Welcoming threshold, and the window's
 flame,
And her grave eyes kindling with kindly
 light.

THE PLOUGH

HE sniffed the clean and eager smell
Of crushed wild garlic, as he thrust
Beneath the sallows ; and a spell
He stood there munching a thick crust—
The fresh tang giving keener zest
To bread and cheese—and watched a pair
Of wagtails preening wing and breast,
Then running—flirting tails in air,
And pied plumes sleeked to silky sheen—
Chasing each other in and out
The wet wild garlic's white and green.

And then remembering, with a shout,
And rattle whirring, he ran back
Again into the Fair Maid's Mead,
To scare the rascal thieves and black
That flocked from far and near to feed
Upon the sprouting grain. As one
They rose with clapping, rustling wings—
Rooks, starlings, pigeons, in the sun
Circling about him in wide rings,
And plovers hovering over him

In mazy, interweaving flight—
Until it made his young wits swim
To see them up against the light,
A dazzling dance of black and white
Against the clear blue April sky—
Wings on wings in flashing flight
Swooping low and soaring high—
Swooping, soaring, fluttering, flapping,
Tossing, tumbling, swerving, dipping,
Chattering, cawing, creaking, clapping,
Till he felt his senses slipping,
And gripped his corncrake rattle tight,
And flourished it above his head
Till every bird was out of sight ;
And laughed, when all had flown and fled,
To think that he, and all alone,
Could put so many thieves to rout.

Then sitting down upon a stone
He wondered if the school were out—
The school where, only yesterday,
He'd sat at work among his mates—
At work that now seemed children's play,
With pens and pencils, books and slates ;
Although he'd liked it well enough,
The hum and scuffling of the school,
And hadn't cared when Grim-and-Gruff
Would call him dunderhead and fool.

And he could see them sitting there,
His class-mates, in the lime-washed room,

With fingers inked and towzled hair—
Bill Baxter with red cheeks abloom,
And bright black eyes ; and Ginger Jim
With freckled face and solemn look,
Who'd wink a pale blue eye at him,
Then sit intent upon his book,
While, caught a-giggle, he was caned.

He'd liked that room, he'd liked it all—
The window steaming when it rained ;
The sunlight dancing on the wall
Among the glossy charts and maps ;
The blotchy stain beside the clock
That only he of all the chaps
Knew for a chart of Dead Man's Rock
That lies in Tiger Island Bay—
The reef on which the schooners split
And founder, that would bear away
The treasure-chest of Cut-Throat-Kit,
That's buried under Black Bill's bones
Beneath the purple pepper-tree . . .
A trail of clean-sucked cherry-stones,
Which you must follow carefully,
Across the dunes of yellow sand
Leads winding upward from the beach
Till, with a pistol in each hand,
And cutlass 'twixt your teeth, you reach . . .

Plumping their fat crops peacefully
Were plovers, pigeons, starlings, rooks,
Feeding on every side while he

Was in the land of storybooks.
He raised his rattle with a shout
And scattered them with yell and crake. . . .
A man must mind what he's about
And keep his silly wits awake,
Not go wool-gathering, if he'd earn
His wage. And soon, no schoolboy now,
He'd take on a man's job, and learn
To build a rick, and drive the plough,
Like father. . . .

Up against the sky,
Beyond the spinney and the stream,
With easy stride and steady eye
He saw his father drive his team,
Turning the red marl gleaming wet
Into long furrows clean and true.
And dreaming there, he longed to set
His young hand to the ploughshare too.

THE OLD PIPER

WITH ears undulled of age, all night he heard
The April singing of the Otterburn.
His wife slept quietly and never stirred,
Though he was restless and must toss and
turn—

But she kept going all the day, while he
Was just a useless bundle in a chair,
And couldn't do a hand's turn—seventy-
three,
And crippled with rheumatics . . .

It was rare,
Hearing the curlew piping in the dark !
'Twas queer he'd got his hearing still so
keen ;

He'd be so bothered if he couldn't hark
To curlew piping, shrill and clear and clean—
Ay, clean, that note !

His piping days were done,
His fingers numb and stiff. And by the
peat

All winter, or all summer in the sun,
He'd sit beside the threshold, in his seat,

Day-long, and listen to the Otterburn
That sang each day and night a different
tune.

It knew more airs than he could ever learn
Upon the small-pipes. January to June,
And June to January, every hour
It changed its music. Now 'twas shrilling
clear

In a high tinkling treble with a power
Of mellow undertones. And to his ear
Even the spates of winter over stones
Made no dull tuneless thundering : he heard
No single roar, but half a hundred tones
Eddying and swirling ; blending, yet un-
blurred ;
No dull-edged note, but each one razor-
keen—

Though supp'e as the sword-blades interlaced
Over the morris-dancers' heads—and clean !
But, nay, there was no word for it. 'Twas
waste

Of breath to try and put the thing in words,
Though on his pipes he'd get the sense of it,
The feel—ay, even of the calls of birds
He'd get some notion, though dull-toned a
bit—

His humming drone had not that quality
Of clean-cut piping. Any shepherd lad
Upon his penny-whistle easily
Could mimic the mere notes. And yet he
had

A gift of feeling, somehow. . . . He must
try

To-morrow if he couldn't tune his pipes,
Must get his wife to strap them carefully . . .
Hark, a new note among the birds—a
snipe's—

A small-pipe's note ! . . .

Drowsing, he did not wake
Until his wife was stirring.

Nor till noon
He told her that he'd half a mind to take
His pipes and see if he could turn a tune
If she would fetch them. And regretfully
She brought the pipes and strapped them on
and set

The bellows under his arm, and patiently
She held the reeds to his numb fingers. Yet
She knew 'twas worse than useless : work
and years

Had dulled that lively touch ; each joint was
stiff

And swollen with rheumatics. . . .

Slowly tears
Ran down his weathered cheeks . . .

And then a whiff
Of peat-reek filled his nostrils ; and quite
still

He sat remembering. Memory was kind
And stript age off him.

And along the hill
By Golden Pots he strove against the wind—

In all his days he never again had known
A wind like thon—on that November day.
For every step that he took forward, blown
Half a step backward, slowly he made way
Against it, buffeted and battered numb,
Chilled to the marrow, till he reached his door,
To find Jack Dodd, the pitman piper, come
To play a contest with him. . . .

Nevermore

There 'd be such piping !

Ay, Jack Dodd had heard
That he could play—that up among the hills
There was a lad could pipe like any bird,
With half a hundred fancy turns and trills,
And give a lead even to Jack himself,
Jack Dodd, the pitmen's champion !

After tea,

When they had smoked a while, down from
the shelf

He'd reached his own small-pipes ; and
speedily

They two were at it, playing, tune for tune,
Against each other all the winter's night,
And all next morning till the stroke of noon,
Piping out bravely all their hearts' delight.

He still could see Jack sitting there, so lean,
Long-backed, broad-shouldered, stooping and
white-faced,
With cropped black head, and black eyes
burning keen ;

Tight-lipped, yet smiling gravely ; round his
waist
His small-pipes strapped, the bellows 'neath
his arm,
His nimble fingers lively at the reeds—
His body swaying to the lilting charm
Of his own magic piping, till great beads
Of sweat were glistening on his low, white
brow.

And he himself, a herd-lad, yellow-haired,
With wide eyes even bluer then than now,
Who sat bolt-upright in his chair and stared
Before him at the steady glowing peat,
As though each note he played he caught in
flight
From the loud wind, and in the quivering heat
Could see it dancing to its own delight.

All night the rafters hummed with piping
airs,
And candle after candle guttered out ;
But not a footstep climbed the creaky stairs
To the dark bedrooms. Turn and turn
about
They piped or listened, while the wind
without
Roared round the steading, battering at the
door
As though to burst it wide ; then with a shout
Swept on across the pitchy leagues of moor :

Pitman and shepherd piping turn for turn
The airs they loved, till to the melody
Their pulses beat ; and their rapt eyes would
burn,
Thrilled with the sight that each most loved
to see—

The pitman, gazing down a gallery
Of glittering black coal, an endless seam ;
And through his piping stole the mystery
Of subterranean waters, and of dream
Corridors dwindling everlastingly.

The shepherd, from the top of Windy Gile
Looking o'er range on range of glowing hills,
A world beneath him, stretching, mile on
mile,
Brown bent and heather, laced by flashing
rills—

His body flooded with the light that fills
The veins with running gold. And April
light
And wind, and all the melody that spills
From tumbling waters, thrilled his pipes that
night.

Ay, thon was playing, thon ! And nevermore
The world would hear such piping. Jack
was dead,
And he, so old and broken.

By the door
All day he sat remembering ; and in bed

He lay beside his sleeping wife all night,
Too spent, too weary, even to toss and turn.
Dawn found him lying, strangely cold and
white,
As though still listening to the Otterburn.

THE NEWS

THE buzzer boomed, and instantly the clang
Of hammers dropt, just as the fendered bow
Bumped with soft splash against the wharf,
—though now
Again within the Yard a hammer rang—
A solitary hammer striking steel
Somewhere aloft—and strangely, stridently
Echoed as though it struck the steely sky,
The low, cold, steely sky.

She seemed to feel
That hammer in her heart—blow after blow
In a strange, clanging hollow seemed to strike
Monotonous, unrelenting, cruel-like—
Her heart that such a little while ago
Had been so full, so happy with its news
Scarce uttered even to itself.

It stopt,
That dreadful hammer. And the silence dropt
Again a moment. Then a clatter of shoes
And murmur of voices as the men trooped
out ;
And as each wife with basket and hot can
Hurried towards the gate to meet her man,

Was whether he would like the food she'd brought—

Whose one desire, to watch her husband eating.

With a grave smile he took his bait from her,

And then without a word they moved away
To where some grimy baulks of timber lay
Beside the river, and 'twas quieter
Than in the crowd of munching, squatting men

And chattering wives and children. As he ate,

With absent eyes upon the river set,
She chattered too a little now and then
Of household happenings; and then silently
They sat and watched the grimy-flowing stream,
Dazed by the stunning din of hissing steam
Escaping from an anchored boat hard by,
Each busy with their own thoughts, who till now

Had shared each thought, each feeling, speaking out

Easily, eagerly, without a doubt,
As happy, innocent children, anyhow,
The innermost secrets of their wedded life.
So as the dinner-hour went quickly by
They sat there for the first time, troubled,
shy—

A silent husband and a silent wife.

But she was only troubled by excess
Of happiness ; and as she watched the stream,
She looked upon her life as in a dream,
Recalling all its tale of happiness
Unbroken and unshadowed since she'd met
Her man the first time, eighteen months
ago. . . .

A keen blue day with sudden flaws of snow
And sudden sunshine, when she first had set
Her wondering eyes upon him—gaily clad
For football in a jersey green and red,
Knees bare beneath white shorts, his curly head
Wind-blown and wet—and knew him for her
lad.

He strode towards her down the windy
street—

The wet grey pavements flashing sudden gold,
And gold the unending coils of smoke that
rolled

Unceasingly overhead, fired by a fleet,
Wild glint of glancing sunlight. On he came
Beside her brother—still a raw, uncouth
Young hobbledehoy—a strapping, mettled
youth

In the first pride of manhood, that wild flame
Touching his hair to fire, his cheeks aglow
With the sharp stinging wind, his arms aswing ;
And as she watched, she felt the tingling sting
Of flying flakes, and in a whirl of snow
A moment he was hidden from her sight.

It passed, and then before she was aware,
With white flakes powdering his ruddy hair
He stood before her, laughing in the light,
In all his bravery of red and green
Snow-sprinkled; and she laughed too. In
the sun
They laughed: and in that laughter they
were one.

Now as with kindled eyes on the unseen
Grey river she sat gazing, she again
Lived through that moment in a golden
dream . . .

And then quite suddenly she saw the stream
Distinct in its cold, grimy flowing—then
The present with its deeper happiness
Thrilled her afresh—this wonder strange and
new—

This dream in her young body coming true,
Incredible, yet certain none-the-less—
This news, scarce broken to herself, that she
Must break to him. She longed to see his
eyes

Kindle to hear it, happy with surprise
When she should break it to him presently.

But she must wait a while yet. Still too
strange,
Too wonderful for words, she could not share
Even with him her secret. He sat there
So quietly, little dreaming of the change

That had come over her—but when he knew !
For he was always one for bairns, was John,
And this would be his own, their own.

There shone

A strange new light on all since this was
true,

All, all seemed strange, the river and the
shore,

The barges and the wharves with timber
piled,

And all her world familiar from a child,

Was as a world she'd never seen before.

And he, too, sat with eyes upon the stream
Remembering that day when first the light
Of her young eyes with laughter sparkling
bright

Kindled to his ; and as he caught the gleam

The life within him quickened suddenly

To fire, and in a world of golden laughter

They stood alone together ; and then after,

When he was playing with his mates and he

Hurtled headlong towards the goal, he knew

Her eyes were on him ; and for her alone,

Who had the merriest eyes he'd ever known,

He played that afternoon. Though until
then

He'd only played to please himself, somehow

She seemed to have a hold upon him, now,

No longer a boy, a man among grown men,

He'd never have a thought apart from her,

From her, his mate . . .

And then that golden night
When, in a whirl of melody and light,
Her merry brown eyes flashing merrier,
They rode together in a gilded car
That seemed to roll for ever round and round
In a blind blaze of light and blare of sound,
For ever and for ever, till afar
It seemed to bear them from the surging
throng

Of lads and lasses happy in release
From the week's work in yards and factories—
For ever through a land of light and song
While they sat, rapt in silence, hand in hand,
And looked into each other's merry eyes,
They two, together, whirled through Paradise,
A golden, glittering, unearthly land,
A land where light and melody were one,
And melody and light, a golden fire
That ran through their young bodies, and
desire,
A golden music streaming from the sun,
Filling their veins with golden melody
And singing fire . . .

And then when quiet fell,
And they together, with so much to tell,
So much to tell each other instantly,
Left the hot throng and roar and glare behind
Seeking the darker streets, and stood at last
In a dark lane where footsteps seldom passed,
Lit by a far lamp and one glowing blind

That seemed to make the darkness yet more
dark

Between the cliffs of houses, black and high,
That soared above them to the starry sky,
A deep blue sky where spark on fiery spark
The stars for them were kindled, as they
raised

Their eyes in new-born wonder to the night ;
And in a solitude of cold starlight
They stood alone together, hushed, and gazed
Into each other's eyes until speech came ;
And underneath the stars they talked and
talked . . .

Then he remembered how they two had
walked

Along a beach that was one golden flame
Of yellow sand beside a flame-blue sea
The day they wedded, that strange day of
dream,
One flame of blue and gold . . .

The murky stream
Flowed once again before his eyes, and he
Dropt back into the present ; and he knew
That he must break the news that suddenly
Had come to him last night as drowsily
He lay beside her—startling, stern and true
Out of the darkness flashing. He must tell
How, as he lay beside her in the night,
His heart had told him he must go and fight,
Must throw up everything he loved so well

To go and fight in lands across the sea
Beside the other lads—must throw up all,
His work, his home. . . .

The shadow of the wall
Fell on her once again, and stridently
That hammer struck her heart, as from the
stream

She raised her eyes to his, and saw their
flame—

Then back into her heart her glad news came
As John smiled on her ; and her golden
dream

Once more was all about her as she thought
Of home, the new home that the future held
For them—they three together. Fear was
quelled

By this new happiness that all unsought
Had sprung from the old happiness. . . .

And he,
Watching her, thought of home too. When
he slept

With her across the threshold first, and slept
That first night in her arms so quietly,
For the first time in all his life he'd known
All that home meant, or nearly all—for yet
Each night brought him new knowledge as
she met

Him, smiling on the clean, white, threshold
stone,

When he returned from labour in the
Yard. . . .

And she'd be waiting for him soon, while he
Was fighting with his fellows oversea—
She would be waiting for him . . .

It was hard

For him that he must go, as go he must,
But harder far for her : things always fell
Harder upon the women. It was well
She didn't dream yet. . . . He could only
trust

She, too, would feel that he had got to go,
Then 'twould not be so hard to go, and
yet . . .

Dreaming, he saw the lamplit table, set
With silver pot and cups and plates aglow
For tea in their own kitchen bright and snug,
With her behind the teapot—saw it all,
The coloured calendars upon the wall,
The bright fire-irons, and the gay hearthrug
She'd made herself from gaudy rags ; his
place

Awaiting him, with something hot-and-hot—
His favourite sausages as like as not,
Between two plates for him—as, with clean
face

Glowing from washing in the scullery,
And such a hunger on him, he would sink
Content into his chair . . .

'Twas strange to think

All this was over, and so suddenly—

'Twas strange, and hard . . .

Still gazing on the stream,

Her thoughts, too, were at home. She heard
the patter

Of tiny feet beside her, and the chatter

Of little tongues . . .

Then loudly through their dream
The buzzer boomed ; and all about them
rose

The men and women : soon the wives were on

The ferry-boat, now puffing to be gone ;

The husbands hurrying, ere the gates should
close,

Back to the Yard. . . .

She, in her dream of gold,
And he, in his new desolation, stood.

Then soberly, as wife and husband should,

They parted with their news as yet untold.

DAFFODILS

HE liked the daffodils. He liked to see
Them nodding in the hedgerows cheerily
Along the dusty lanes as he went by—
Nodding and laughing to a fellow—ay,
Nodding and laughing till you'd almost
think

They, too, enjoyed the jest.

Without a wink
That solemn butler said it, calm and smug,
Deep-voiced as though he talked into a jug :
“His lordship says he won't require no more
Crocks riveted or mended till the war
Is over.”

Lord ! He'd asked to have a wire
The moment that his lordship should desire
To celebrate the occasion fittingly
By a wild burst of mending crockery
Like a true Englishman, and hang expense !
He'd had to ask it, though he'd too much
sense

To lift a lash or breathe a word before
His lordship's lordship closed the heavy door.

And then he'd laughed. Lord ! but it did
 him good,
 That quiet laugh. And somewhere in the
 wood,
 Behind the Hall there, a woodpecker laughed
 Right out aloud as though he'd gone clean
 daft—

Right out aloud he laughed, the brazen bird,
 As if he didn't care a straw who heard—
 But then he'd not his daily bread to earn
 By mending crocks.

And now at every turn
 The daffodils were laughing quietly,
 Nodding and laughing to themselves, as he
 Chuckled : Now there's a patriot, real true-
 blue !

It seemed the daffodils enjoyed it too—
 The fun of it. He wished that he could
 see—

Old solemn-mug—they laughing quietly
 At him. But, then, he'd never have a dim
 Idea they laughed, and, least of all, at him.
 He'd never dream they could be laughing at
 A butler.

'Twould be good to see the fat
 Old peach-cheek in his solemn black and
 starch

Parading in his pompous parlour-march
 Across that field of laughing daffodils.
 'Twould be a sight to make you skip up hills,

Ay, crutch and all, and never feel your pack,
To see a butler in his starch and black
Among the daffodils, ridiculous
As that old bubbly-jock with strut and fuss—
Though that was rather rough upon the bird !
For all his pride he didn't look absurd
Among the flowers—nor even that black sow
Grunting and grubbing in among them now.

And he was glad he hadn't got a trade
That starched the mother-wit in you, and
 made
A man look silly in a field of flowers.
'Twas better mending crocks, although for
 hours
You hobbled on—ay ! and maybe for days—
Hungry and cold along the muddy ways
Without a job. And even when the sun
Was shining, 'twas not altogether fun
To lose the chance of earning a few pence
In these days : though 'twas well he'd got
 the sense
To see the funny side of things. It cost
You nothing, laughing to yourself. You lost
Far more by going fiddle-faced through life
Looking for trouble.

He would tell his wife
When he got home. But lord, she'd never see
What tickled him so mightily, not she !
She'd only look up puzzled-like, and say
She didn't wonder at his lordship. Nay,

With tripe and trotters at the price they were,
You'd got to count your coppers and take
care

Of every farthing.

Jack would see the fun—
Ay, Jack would see the joke. Jack was his
son—

The youngest of the lot. And, man-alive,
'Twas queer that only one of all the five
Had got a twinkle in him—all the rest
Dull as ditchwater to the merriest jest.
Good lads enough they were, their mother's
sons ;

And they'd all pluck enough to face the guns
Out at the front. They'd got their mother's
pluck :

And he was proud of them, and wished them
luck.

That was no laughing matter—though 'twas
well

Maybe if you could crack a joke in hell
And shame the devil. Jack at least would
fight

As well as any though his heart was light.
Jack was the boy for fighting and for fun ;
And he was glad to think he'd got a son
Who, even facing bloody death, would see
That little joke about the crockery,
And chuckle as he charged.

His thoughts dropped back

Through eighteen years ; and he again saw
 Jack

At the old home beneath the Malvern hills,
A little fellow plucking daffodils,
A little fellow who could scarcely walk,
Yet chuckling as he snapped each juicy stalk
And held up every yellow bloom to smell,
Poking his tiny nose into the bell
And sniffing its fresh scent, and chuckling still
As though he'd secrets with each daffodil.
Ay, he could see again the little fellow
In his blue frock among that laughing yellow,
And plovers in their sheeny black and white
Flirting and tumbling in the morning light
About his curly head. He still could see,
Shutting his eyes, as plain as plain could be,
Drift upon drift, those long-dead daffodils
Against the far green of the Malvern hills,
Nodding and laughing round his little lad,
As if to see him happy made them glad—
Nodding and laughing. . . .

They were nodding now,
The daffodils, and laughing—yet, somehow,
They didn't seem so merry now. . . .

And he
Was fighting in a bloody trench maybe
For very life this minute. . . .

They missed Jack,
And he would give them all to have him back.

BETWEEN THE LINES

WHEN consciousness came back, he found he
lay
Between the opposing fires, but could not tell
On which hand were his friends ; and either
way
For him to turn was chancy—bullet and
shell
Whistling and shrieking over him, as the
glare
Of searchlights scoured the darkness to blind
day.
He scrambled to his hands and knees ascare,
Dragging his wounded foot through puddled
clay,
And tumbled in a hole a shell had scooped
At random in a turnip-field between
The unseen trenches where the foes lay
cooped
Through that unending battle of unseen,
Dead-locked, league-stretching armies ; and
quite spent
He rolled upon his back within the pit,

And lay secure, thinking of all it meant—
His lying in that little hole, sore hit,
But living, while across the starry sky
Shrapnel and shell went screeching overhead—
Of all it meant that he, Tom Dodd, should
lie

Among the Belgian turnips, while his bed . . .

If it were he, indeed, who'd climbed each
night,
Fagged with the day's work, up the narrow
stair,
And slipt his clothes off in the candle-light,
Too tired to fold them neatly on a chair
The way his mother 'd taught him—too dog-
tired

After the long day's serving in the shop,
Inquiring what each customer required,
Politely talking weather, fit to drop. . . .

And now for fourteen days and nights at
least

He hadn't had his clothes off ; and had lain
In muddy trenches, napping like a beast
With one eye open, under sun and rain
And that unceasing hell-fire. . . .

It was strange
How things turned out—the chances ! You'd
just got
To take your luck in life, you couldn't
change

Your luck.

And so here he was lying shot
Who just six months ago had thought to
 spend
His days behind a counter. Still, perhaps . . .
And now, God only knew how he would end !

He'd like to know how many of the chaps
Had won back to the trench alive, when he
Had fallen wounded and been left for dead,
If any ! . . .

 This was different, certainly,
From selling knots of tape and reels of thread
And knots of tape and reels of thread and
 knots

Of tape and reels of thread and knots of tape,
Day in, day out, and answering "Have you
 got's ?"

And "Do you keep's ?" till there seemed no
 escape

From everlasting serving in a shop,
Inquiring what each customer required,
Politely talking weather, fit to drop,
With swollen ankles, tired. . . .

 But he was tired
Now. Every bone was aching, and had
 ached

For fourteen days and nights in that wet
trench—

Just duller when he slept than when he
waked—

Crouching for shelter from the steady drench
Of shell and shrapnel. . . .

That old trench, it seemed
Almost like home to him. He'd slept and fed
And sung and smoked in it, while shrapnel
screamed

And shells went whining harmless overhead—
Harmless, at least, as far as he . . .

But Dick—

Dick hadn't found them harmless yesterday
At breakfast, when he'd said he couldn't
stick

Eating dry bread, and crawled out the back
way,

And brought them butter in a lordly dish—
Butter enough for all, and held it high,
Yellow and fresh and clean as you could
wish—

When plump upon the plate from out the
sky

A shell fell bursting. . . . Where the butter
went

God only knew! . . .

And Dick . . . He dared not think
Of what had come to Dick . . . or what it
meant—

The shrieking and the whistling and the stink
He'd lived in fourteen days and nights.

'Twas luck

That he still lived . . . And queer how
little then

He seemed to care that Dick . . . Perhaps
 'twas pluck
That hardened him—a man among the men—
Perhaps . . . Yet, only think things out a bit,
And he was rabbit-livered, blue with funk !
And he'd liked Dick . . . and yet when
 Dick was hit
He hadn't turned a hair. The meanest
 skunk
He should have thought would feel it when
 his mate
Was blown to smithereens—Dick, proud as
 punch,
Grinning like sin, and holding up the plate—
But he had gone on munching his dry hunch,
Unwinking, till he swallowed the last crumb.

Perhaps 'twas just because he dared not let
His mind run upon Dick, who'd been his
 chum—
He dared not now, though he could not
 forget.

Dick took his luck. And, life or death,
 'twas luck
From first to last ; and you'd just got to
 trust
Your luck and grin. It wasn't so much
 pluck
As knowing that you'd got to, when needs
 must,

And better to die grinning. . . .

Quiet now
Had fallen on the night. On either hand
The guns were quiet. Cool upon his brow
The quiet darkness brooded, as he scanned
The starry sky. He'd never seen before
So many stars. Although, of course, he'd
known

That there were stars, somehow before the war
He'd never realised them—so thick-sown,
Millions and millions. Serving in the shop,
Stars didn't count for much; and then at
nights

Strolling the pavement, dull and fit to drop,
You didn't see much but the city lights.
He'd never in his life seen so much sky
As he'd seen this last fortnight. It was queer
The things war taught you. He'd a mind
to try

To count the stars—they shone so bright and
clear.

One, two, three, four . . . Ah, God, but he
was tired . . .

Five, six, seven, eight . . .

Yes : it was number eight.
And what was the next thing that she re-
quired ?

(Too bad of customers to come so late,
At closing-time !) Again within the shop
He handled knots of tape and reels of thread,
Politely talking weather, fit to drop. . . .

When once again the whole sky overhead
Flared blind with searchlights, and the shriek
of shell

And scream of shrapnel roused him. Drowsily
He stared about him wondering. Then he fell
Into deep, dreamless slumber.

He could see
Two dark eyes peeping at him ere he knew
He was awake, and it again was day—
An August morning burning to clear blue.
The frightened rabbit scuttled. . . .

Far away
A sound of firing. . . . Up there, in the sky,
Big dragon-flies hung hovering . . . snow-
balls burst
About them. . . .

Flies and snowballs! With a cry
He crouched to watch the airmen pass—the
first
That he'd seen under fire. Lord, that was
pluck—
Shells bursting all about them—and what
nerve!

They took their chance, and trusted to their luck—

At such a dizzy height to dip and swerve,
Dodging the shell-fire. . . .

Hell ! but one was hit,
And tumbling like a pigeon plump. . . .
Thank Heaven

It righted, and then turned ; and after it
The whole flock followed safe—four, five,
six, seven—

Yes, they were all there safe. He hoped
they'd win

Back to their lines in safety. They deserved,
Even if they were Germans . . . 'Twas no
sin

To wish them luck. Think how that beggar
swerved

Just in the nick of time !

He, too, must try
To win back to the lines, though, likely as
not,

He'd take the wrong turn : but he couldn't lie
For ever in that hungry hole and rot.

He'd got to take his luck, to take his chance
Of being sniped by foes or friends. He'd be
With any luck in Germany or France
Or kingdom-come next morning. . . .

Drearily
The blazing day burnt over him. Shot and
shell

Whistling and whining ceaselessly. But light
Faded at last, and as the darkness fell
He rose and crawled away into the night.

STRAWBERRIES

SINCE four she had been plucking strawberries ;
And it was only eight now, and the sun
Already blazing. There'd be little ease
For her until the endless day was done. . . .

Yet, why should she have any ease, while he—
While he . . .

But there, she mustn't think of him,
Fighting beneath that burning sun, maybe—
His rifle nigh red-hot, and every limb
Aching for sleep, the sweat dried on his brow,
And baking in the blaze, and such a thirst,
Prickly and choking, she could feel it now
In her own throat. He'd said it was the
worst,
In his last letter, worst of all to bear,
That burning thirst—that, and the hellish
noise. . . .

And she was plucking strawberries ; and there
In the cool shadow of the elm their boys,
Their baby-boys, were sleeping quietly. . . .

But she was aching too : her head and back
 Were one hot blinding ache ; and dizzily
 Sometimes across her eyes the light swam
 black

With dancing spots of red . . .

 So ripe and sweet
 Among their fresh green leaves the straw-
 berries lay,

Although the earth was baking in the heat,
 Burning her soles—and yet the summer day
 Was young enough !

 If she could only cram
 A handful of fresh berries sweet and cool
 Into his mouth, while he . . .

 A red light swam
 Before her eyes . . .

 She mustn't think, poor fool,
 What he'd be doing now, or she'd go
 crazed . . .

Then what would happen to them left alone—
 The little lads !

 And he would be fair 'mazed,
 When he came back, to see how they had
 grown,

William and Dick, and how they talked.

Two year

Since he had gone—and he had never set
 His eyes upon his youngest son. 'Twas
 queer

To think he hadn't seen his baby yet—
 And it nigh fourteen months old.

Everything
Was queer in these days. She could never
guess
How it had come about that he could bring
Himself to go and fight. 'Twas little less
Than murder to have taken him, and he
So mild and easy-tempered, never one
For drink or picking quarrels hastily . . .

And now he would be fighting in that
sun . . .
'Twas quite beyond her. Yet, somehow, it
seemed
He'd got to go. She couldn't under-
stand . . .
When they had married, little had they
dreamed
What things were coming to ! In all the land
There was no gentler husband . . .

It was queer :
She couldn't get the rights of it, no way.
She thought and thought, but couldn't get it
clear
Why he'd to leave his own work—making
hay
'Twould be this weather—leave his home, and
all,
His wife and his young family, and go
To fight in foreign lands, and maybe fall,
Fighting another lad he didn't know,
And had no quarrel with. . . .

The world was mad,
Or she was going crazy. Anyhow
She couldn't see the rights of it . . . Her lad
Had thought it right to go, she knew . . .
But now
She mustn't think about it all. . . . And so
She'd best stop puzzling, and pluck straw-
berries. . . .

And every woman plucking in the row
Had husband, son, or brother overseas.

Men seemed to see things differently : and
still
She wondered sore if even they knew why
They went themselves, almost against their
will. . . .

But sure enough, that was her baby's cry.
'Twas feeding-time ; and she'd be glad to
rest
Her back a bit. It always gave her ease,
To feel her baby feeding at her breast,
And pluck to go on gathering strawberries.

THE BLAST-FURNACE

AND such a night ! But maybe in that mood
'Twas for the best ; for he was like to
brood—

And he could hardly brood on such a night
With that squall blowing, on this dizzy
height

Where he caught every breath of it—the
snow

Stinging his cheek, and melting in the glow
Above the furnace, big white flakes that fell
Sizzling upon the red-hot furnace-bell ;
And the sea roaring, down there in the dark,
So loud to-night he needn't stop to hark—
Four hundred feet below where now he stood.
A lively place to earn a livelihood—

His livelihood, his mother's, and the three
Young sisters', quite a little family
Depending on him now—on him, Jim Burn,
Just nineteen past—to work for them, and
earn

Money enough to buy them daily bread
Already . . .

And his father on the bed
At home . . . gey sudden . . .

Nay, he mustn't think,
But shove his trolley to the furnace brink,
And tip his load upon the glowing bell,
Then back again towards the hoist. 'Twas
well

He'd work to stop him thinking. He was
glad

His mate to-night was not a talky lad,
But Peter, mum-glum Peter, who would
stare

With such queer sulky looks upon the flare
When round the dipping bell it shot up
high

With roar and flourish into that black sky.
He liked to hear it roaring, liked to see
The great flame leaping skyward suddenly,
Then sinking slowly, as the bell rose up
And covered it again with red-hot cup,
When it would feed more quiet for a time
Upon the meal of ironstone and lime
He'd fetched it in his trolley . . .

Ay, and he,
Trundling his truck along that gallery
High in the air all night to keep it fed—
And all the while his father lying dead
At home—to earn a livelihood. 'Twas
strange

To think what it all meant to him—the
change . . .

And strange he'd never thought before how
queer

It was for him, earning his bread up here
On this blast-furnace, perched on the cliff-
top—

Four hundred feet or so, a dizzy drop,
And he'd be feeding fishes in the sea !
How loud it roared to-night, and angrily—
He liked to hear it breaking on the shore,
And the wind's threshing, and the furnace'
roar ;

And then the sudden quiet, a dead lull,
When you could only hear a frightened gull
Screeching down in the darkness there below,
Or a dog's yelp from the valley, or the
snow

Sizzling upon hot iron. Queer, indeed,
To think that he had never taken heed
Before to-night, or thought about it all.

He'd been a boy till this, and had no call
To turn his mind to thinking seriously ;
But he'd grown up since yesterday, and he
Must think a man's thoughts now—since
yesterday,

When he'd not had a thought but who should
play
Full-back for Cleveland Rovers, now that
Jack

Had gone to Montreal ; or should he back
Old Girl or Cleopatra for the Cup.

In four - and - twenty hours he had grown
up . . .

His father, sinking back there on the bed,
With glassy eyes and helpless, lolling head . . .
The dropping jaw . . . the breath that didn't
come,

Though still he listened for it, frozen
numb. . . .

And then, his mother . . . but he must not
let

His mind run on his mother now. And yet
He'd often thought his father glum and grim.
He understood now. It was not for him,
His son, to breathe a word to her, when he,
Her husband, had borne with her patiently
Through all those years. Ay, now he under-
stood

Much, since he hadn't his own livelihood
To think of only, but five mouths to feed—
And the oldest, the most helpless . . . He
had need

To understand a little . . .

But to-night
He mustn't brood. . . . And what a golden
light

The steady spurt of molten slag below
Threw up upon the snow-clouds—and the
snow

Drifting down through it in great flakes of
gold,

Melting to steam, or driven, white and cold,
Into the darkness on a sudden gust.
And how the cold wind caught him, as he
thrust

His empty trolley back towards the hoist,
Straight from the sea, making his dry lips
moist

With salty breath.

'Twas strange to-night how he
Was noticing, and seeing suddenly
Things for the first time he'd not seen before,
Though he'd been on this shift at least a score
Of times. But things were different somehow.

Strange
To think his father's death had wrought the
change
And made him see things different—little
things :

The sudden flashing of a sea-gull's wings
Out of the dark, bewildered by the glare ;
And, when the flame leapt, mum-glum Peter's
hair

Kindling a fierier red ; the wind ; the snow ;
The unseen washing of the waves below
About the cliff-foot. He could almost see,
In fancy, breakers frothing furiously
Against the crumbling cliffs—the frantic spray
Leaping into the darkness, nigh half way
Up the sheer height.

And now his thoughts dropt back
Into the valley, lying still and black

Behind him—and the mine where other men
 Were toiling on their nightshift, even then
 Working the ironstone for daily bread,
 Their livelihood. . . .

He saw the little red
 Raw row of square brick houses, dark they'd be
 And quiet now. Yet plainly he could see
 The street he lived in—ay, and Number Eight,
 His father's house : the rusty iron gate ;
 The unkempt garden, and the blistered door ;
 The unwashed doorstep he'd not seen before,
 Or, leastways, hadn't noticed ; and the bell
 That never rang, though he remembered well
 His father 'd tinkered it times out of mind ;
 And in each window a drawn yellow blind,
 Broken and grimy—and that blind to-day
 Drawn down for the first time. . . .

His father lay
 In the front bedroom, quiet on the bed . . .
 And he, upon his usual shift . . .

She'd said,
 His mother 'd said, he shouldn't take his shift
 Before the undertaker 'd been to lift . . .
 'Twas scarcely decent : that was what she
 said—

Him working, and his father lying dead,
 And hardly cold. . . .

And she, to talk to him,
 His son, of decency, there, with that grim
 Half-smile still on her husband's cold white
 face !

He couldn't bide a moment in the place
Listening to her chat-chatter, knowing all
That he knew now. . . . But there, he had
no call
To blame her, when his father'd never blamed.
He wondered in that room she wasn't
shamed. . . .

She didn't understand. He understood,
Now he'd grown up, and had his livelihood,
And theirs, to earn. . . .

Lord, but that was a rare
Fine flourish the flame made, a bonny flare
Leaping up to the stars. The snow had stopt—
He hadn't heeded—and the wind had dropt
Suddenly ; and the stars were shining clear.
Over the furnace' roaring he could hear
The waves wash-washing ; and could see the
foam

Lifting and falling down there in the gloam . . .
White as his father's face. . . .

He'd never heard
His father murmur once—nay, not a word
He'd muttered : he was never one to blame.
And men had got to take things as they came.

IN THE MEADOW

THE smell of wet hay in the heat
All morning steaming round him rose,
As, in a kind of nodding doze,
Perched on the hard and jolting seat,
He drove the rattling, jangling rake
Round and around the Five Oaks Mead.
With that old mare he scarcely need
To drive at all, or keep awake.
Gazing with half-shut, sleepy eyes
At her white flanks and grizzled tail
That flicked and flicked, without avail,
To drive away the cloud of flies
That hovered, closing and unclosing,
A shimmering hum and humming shimmer,
Dwindling dim and ever dimmer
In his dazzled sight, till, dozing,
He seemed to hear a murmuring stream
And gaze into a rippling pool
Beneath thick branches dark and cool—
And gazing, gazing till a gleam
Within the darkness caught his eyes,
He saw there smiling up at him

A young girl's face, now rippling dim,
Now flashing clear . . .

Without surprise
He marked the eyes translucent blue,
The full red lips, that seemed to speak,
The curves of rounded chin and cheek,
The low, broad brow, sun-tanned . . .

He knew
That face, yet could not call to mind
Where he had seen it, and in vain
Strove to recall . . . when sudden rain
Crashed down and made the clear pool blind,
And it was lost . . .

And, with a jerk
That well-nigh shook him from his seat,
He wakened to the steamy heat
And clank and rattle.

Still at work
The stolid mare kept on ; and still
Over her hot white flanks the flies
Hung humming ; and his dazzled eyes
Closed gradually again, until
He dozed . . .

And stood within the door
Of Dinchill dairy, drinking there
Thirst-quenching draughts of stone-cold air—
The scoured white shelves and sanded floor
And shallow milk-pans creamy-white
Gleamed coldly in the dusky light . . .
And then he saw her, stooping down
Over a milk-pan, while her eyes

Looked up at him without surprise
 Over the shoulder of her gown—
 Her fresh print gown of speedwell blue . . .
 The eyes that looked out of the cool
 Untroubled crystal of the pool
 Looked into his again.

He knew

Those eyes now . . .

From his dreamy doze

A sudden jolting of the rake
 Aroused him.

Startled broad awake

He sat upright, lost in amaze
 That he should dream of her—that lass!—
 And see her face within the pool!

He'd known her always. Why, at school
 They'd sat together in the class.
 He'd always liked her well enough,
 Young Polly Dale—and they had played
 At Prisoners' Base and Who's Afraid,
 At Tiggy and at Blind Man's Buff,
 A hundred times together . . .

Ay,

He'd always known her . . . It was strange,
 Though he had noticed that a change
 Had come upon her—she was shy,
 And quieter, since she left school
 And put her hair up—he'd not seen
 Her face till from the glancing sheen
 It looked up at him from the pool . . .

PARTNERS

HE'D got to see it through. Ay, that was
plain—

Plain as the damning figures on that page
Which burnt and bit themselves into his brain
Since he'd first lighted on them—such an age
Since he'd first lighted on them ! though the
clock

Had only ticked one hour out—its white face
And black hands counting time alone. . . .

The shock
Had dropped him out of time and out of
space

Into the dead void of eternity,
Lightless and aching, where his soul hung
dead

With wide-set staring eyes that still could see
Those damning figures, burning hugely red
On the low aching dome of the black heaven
That crushed upon his temples — glaring
bright—

10,711—
Searing his eyeballs. . . .

Yet his living sight
Was fixed on the white ledger, while he sat
Before his office-table in his chair—
The chair he'd taken when he'd hung his hat
Within the cupboard door, and brushed his
hair,
And stood a moment, humming "Chevy
Chase,"

His hands beneath his coat-tails, by the grate,
Warming his back, and thinking of a case
They'd won outright with costs, and . . .

Phil was late :
But Phil was Phil. At home they used to
call

His brother "Better-late." At every turn
He'd had to wait for Phil. And after all
There wasn't so much doing, now that
concern . . .

And little thinking anything was wrong,
Laying his hand upon his own armchair
To draw it out, still humming the old song,
He'd seen the note from Philip lying there
Upon the open ledger.

Once he read
The truth, unrealising, and again,
But only two words echoed through his head,
And buzzed uncomprehended in his brain—
"Embezzled" and "absconded."

Phil had spelt
His shame out boldly in his boyish hand.

And then those figures . . .

Dizzily he felt
The truth burn through him. He could
hardly stand,
But sank into his chair with eyes set wide
Upon those damning figures, murmuring
"Phil!"

And listening to the whirr of wheels outside,
And sparrows cheeping on the window-sill—
Still murmuring "Phil! Poor Phil!"

But Phil was gone :
And he was left alone to bear the brunt. . . .

"Phil! Little Phil!"

And still the morning shone
Bright at the window . . .

Callous, curt, and blunt,
The world would call his brother . . . not
that name!

And yet names mattered little at this pass.
He'd known that Phil was slack . . . but
this!

The blame
Was his as much as Phil's. As in a glass
Darkly he saw he'd been to blame as well :
And he would bear the blame. Had he not
known
That Phil was slack? For all that he could
tell,

If he'd looked after Phil, this might . . .

Alone

He'd got to face the music. He was glad
He was alone . . . And yet, for Phil's own
sake,

If he had only had the pluck, poor lad,
To see the thing through like a man, and take
His punishment !

For him was no escape,
Either by Phil's road or that darker road.
He knew the cost, and how the thing would
shape—

Too well he knew the full weight of the load
He strapped upon his shoulders. It was just
That he should bear the burden on his back.
He'd trusted Phil ; and he'd no right to trust
Even his brother, knowing he was slack,
When other people's money was at stake.
He'd, too, been slack ; and slackness was a
crime—

The deadliest crime of all . . .

And broad awake,
As in a nightmare, he was "doing time"
Already . . .

Yet, he'd only trusted Phil—
His brother, Phil—and it had come to this !

Always before whenever things went ill
His brother 'd turned to him for help ; and his
Had always been the hand stretched out to
him.

Now Phil had fled even him. If he'd but
known !

Brooding he saw with tender eyes grown dim
Phil running down that endless road alone—
Phil running from himself down that dark
road—

The road which leads nowhither, which is
hell ;

And yearning towards him, bowed beneath his
load,

And murmuring " Little Phil ! " . . .

Again he fell

Into the dead void of eternity,

Lightless and aching, where his soul hung
dead

With wide-set staring eyes that still could see
Those damning figures, burning hugely red
On the low aching dome of the black heaven
That crushed upon his temples — glaring
bright—

10,711—

Searing his eyeballs . . .

When a ripple of light

Dappled his desk . . .

And they were boys together,
Rambling the hills of home that April day,
Stumbling and plunging knee-deep through
the heather

Towards Hallypike, the little lough that lay
Glancing and gleaming in the sun, to search
For eggs of inland-breeding gulls. He heard
The curlew piping ; saw a blackcock perch
Upon a dyke hard-by—a lordly bird

With queer curled tail. And soon they
reached the edge—

The quaggy edge of Hallypike. And then
The gulls rose at them screaming from the
sedge

With flapping wings ; and for a while like
men

They stood their ground among the quaking
moss,

Until half-blinded by the dazzling white
Of interweaving wings, and at a loss

Which way to turn, they only thought of
flight

From those fierce cruel beaks and hungry
eyes—

Yet stood transfixed, each on a quaking clump
With hands to ears to shut out those wild
cries.

Then the gulls closed on Phil ; and with a
jump

And one shrill yell he'd plunged into the lake
Half-crazed with terror. Only just in time
He'd stumbled after through the quag aquake
And caught him by the coat, and through
black slime

Had dragged him into safety, far away
From the horror of white wings and beaks
and eyes.

And he remembered now how Philip lay
Sobbing upon his bosom. . . .

Now those cries

Were threatening Phil again ; and he was
 caught
Blind in a beating, baffling, yelling hell
Of wings and beaks and eyes. And there
 was naught
That he could do for him. . . .

 Once more he fell
Into the dead void of eternity,
Lightless and aching, and his soul hung dead
With wide-set staring eyes that still could see
Those damning figures, burning hugely red
On the low aching dome of the black heaven
That crushed upon his temples — glaring
 bright—

10,711—

Searing his eyeballs . . .

 Then the pitchy night
Rolled by . . .

 And now that summer noon they sat
In the shallows of Broomlee lake, the water
 warm

About their chins, and talked of this and
 that ;

And heeded nothing of the coming storm,
Or the strange breathless stillness everywhere
On which the dull note of the cuckoo fell
Monotonously beating through dead air,
A throbbing pulse of heat made audible.
And even when the sky was brooding grey
They'd slowly dressed, and started to walk
 round

The mile-long lake ; but when they'd got
half-way

A heavy fear fell on them, and they found
That they were clutching hands. The still
lough gleamed

Livid before them 'neath a livid sky

Sleek and unrippling. . . . Suddenly they
screamed

And ran headlong for home, they knew not
why—

Ran stumbling through the heath, and never
stopped—

And still hot brooding horror on them pressed
When they had climbed up Sewingshields, and
dropped

Dead-beat beneath the dyke ; and on his
breast

Poor frightened Phil had sobbed himself to
sleep.

And even when the crashing thunder came,
Phil snuggled close in slumber sound and
deep ;

And he alone had watched the lightning flame
Across the fells, and flash on Hallypike. . . .

And in his office chair he felt once more
His back against the sharp stones of the dyke,
And Phil's hot clutching arms . . .

. . . An outer door
Banged in the wind, and roused him . . .

He was glad,

In spite of all, to think he'd trusted Phil.
He'd got to see it through. . . .

He saw the lad,
His little frightened brother crouching still
Beneath the brooding horror of the sky—
That he might take him in his arms once
more !

Now he must pull himself together, ay !
For there was some one tapping at the door.

THE ELM

THE wind had caught the elm at last.
He'd lain all night and wondered how
'Twas bearing up against the blast :
And it was down for ever now,
Snapt like a match-stick. He, at dawn,
Had risen from his sleepless bed
And, hobbling to the window, drawn
The blind up, and had seen, instead
Of that brave tree against the sky,
Thrust up into the windless blue
A broken stump not ten feet high. . . .

And it was changed, the world he knew,
The world he'd known since he, tip-toe,
Had first looked out beneath the eaves,
And seen that tree at dawn aglow,
Soaring with all its countless leaves
In their first glory of fresh green,
Like a big flame above the mead.

How many mornings he had seen
It soaring since—well, it would need

A better head to figure out
Than his, now he was seventy-five,
And failing fast without a doubt—
The last of fifteen, left alive,
That in that very room were born,
Ay, and upon that very bed
He'd left at daybreak.

Many a morn
He'd seen it, stark against the red
Of winter sunrise, or in Spring—
Some April morning, dewy-clear,
With all its green buds glittering
In the first sunbeams, soaring sheer
Out of low mist.

The morn he wed
It seemed with glittering jewels hung. . . .

And fifty year his wife was dead—
And she so merry-eyed and young. . . .

And it was black the night she died,
Dead black against the starry sky,
When he had flung the window wide
Upon the night so crazily
Instead of drawing down the blind
As he had meant. He was so dazed,
And fumbled so, he couldn't find
The hasp to pull it to, though crazed
To shut them out, that starry night,
And that great funeral plume of black,
So awful in the cold starlight.

He'd fumbled till they drew him back,
And closed it for him. . . .

And for long
At night he couldn't bear to see
An elm against the stars.

'Twas wrong,
He knew, to blame an innocent tree—
Though some folk hated elms, and thought
Them evil, for their great boughs fell
So suddenly. . . .

George Stubbs was caught
And crushed to death. You couldn't tell
What brought that great bough crashing
there,

Just where George sat—his cider-keg
Raised to his lips—for all the air
Was still as death . . . And just one leg
Stuck silly-like out of the leaves
When Seth waked up ten yards away,
Where he'd been snoozing 'mid the sheaves.

'Twas queer-like ; but you couldn't say
The tree itself had been to blame.
That bough was rotten through and through,
And would have fallen just the same
Though George had not been there. . . .

'Twas true
That undertakers mostly made
Cheap coffins out of elm . . .

But he—
Well, he could never feel afraid

Of any living thing. That tree,
He'd seemed to hate it for a time
After she'd died . . . And yet somehow
You can't keep hating without rhyme
Or reason any live thing.

Now

He grieved to see it, fallen low,
With almost every branch and bough
Smashed into splinters. All that snow,
A dead-weight, and that heavy blast,
Had dragged it down : and at his feet
It lay, the mighty tree, at last.

And he could make its trunk his seat
And rest awhile, this winter's noon
In the warm sunshine. He could just
Hobble so far. And very soon
He'd lie as low himself. He'd trust
His body to that wood.

Old tree,

So proud and brave this many a year,
Now brought so low . . .

Ah ! there was he,

His grandson, Jo, with never a fear
Riding a bough unbroken yet—
A madcap, like his father, Jim !
He'd teach him sense, if he could get
Behind him with a stick, the limb !

THE DOCTOR

HE'D soon be home. The car was running
well,
Considering what she'd been through, since
the bell
Tumbled him out again—just as his head
Sank in the pillow, glad to get to bed
After the last night's watching, and a day
Of travelling snowy roads without a stay—
To find the tall young shepherd at the door.

“The wife's gey bad in child-bed”—and no
more
He'd said till they were seated in the car,
And he was asked, Where to? and was it far?
“The Scalp,” he'd said—“some fifteen mile
or so.”

And they'd set out through blinding squalls
of snow
To climb the hills. The car could scarcely
crawl
At times, she skidded so ; and with that squall

Clean in his eyes he scarcely saw to steer—
His big lamps only lit a few yards clear.

But those young eyes beside him seemed to
 pierce

The fifteen miles of smother fuming fierce
Between the husband and his home—the light
In that far bedroom window held his sight,
As though he saw clean through the blinding
 squall

To the little square stone steadying that held all
His heart—so solitary, bleak, and grey
Among the snowdrifts on the windy braise,
Beyond the burn that, swollen, loud, and black,
Threatened the single plank that kept the
 track

Between them and the outside world secure.
If that were gone when he got back, for sure
They'd have to plunge waist-deep in that
 black spate

And cling for life upon the old sheep-gate,
If it were not gone too, to cross at all. . . .

And she! He saw the shadow on the wall
Behind the bed, his mother's, as she bent
To comfort Mary, for a moment spent
By the long agony . . . That shadow seemed
So black and threatening, and the candle
 gleamed

So strangely in those wild bright eyes. . . .
 They'd be

Lucky to reach the bank at all ; for he
Had been through that burn once on such a
 night,
And he remembered how he'd had to fight
The frothing flood, rolled over, beaten, bruised,
And well-nigh dragged down under, though
 well used
To every mood and temper of the burn.

Yet, though he gazed so far, he missed no
 turn
In all those climbing miles of snow-blind way
Until the car stopt dead by Gallows' Brae,
And they'd to leave her underneath a dyke,
And plunge knee-deep through drift-choked
 slack and syke
Until they reached the plank that still held
 fast,
Though quivering underfoot in that wild blast
Like a stretched bow-string. Dizzily they
 crossed
Above that brawling blackness, torn and tossed
To flashing spray about the lantern. Then,
Setting their teeth, they took the brae, like
 men
At desperate hazard charging certain death ;
And nigh the crest the doctor reeled, his
 breath
Knocked out of him, and sinking helplessly
Knew nothing till he wakened drowsily
Before the peat and found himself alone

In a strange kitchen.

But a heavy moan
Just overhead recalled him, and he leapt
Instantly to his feet, alert, and crept
Upstairs with noiseless step until he came
To the low bedroom where the candle flame
Showed the old woman standing by the bed
On which the young wife lay. His noiseless
tread
Scarce startling them, he paused a moment
while
Those strained white lips and wild eyes strove
to smile
Bravely and tenderly as the husband bent
Over the bed to kiss her. When he went
Without a word, closing the creaking door
And creeping quietly downstairs, once more
The room was filled with moaning.

.

When at last
His part was done, and danger safely past,
And into a wintry world with lusty crying
That little life had ventured, and was lying
Beside the drowsy mother on the bed,
Downstairs the doctor stole with noiseless
tread,
And, entering the kitchen quietly,
Saw the young father gazing fearfully
Into the fire with dazed, unseeing eyes.
He spoke to him ; and still he did not rise,

But sat there staring with that senseless gaze
Set on the peat that with a sudden blaze
Lit up his drawn face, bloodless 'neath its tan.
But when the doctor stooped and touched the
man

Upon the shoulder, starting to his feet
He staggered, almost falling in the peat,
Whispering "She's safe! She's safe!"

And then he leapt
Suddenly up the stair. The doctor crept
Speedily after him without a sound;
But when he reached the upper room he
found

He wasn't needed. The young husband bent
Over his wife and baby, quiet, content;
Then the wife stirred, opening her eyes, and
smiled,
And they together looked upon their child.

The doctor drowsed till dawn beside the peat,
Napping uneasily in the high-backed seat,
Half-conscious of the storm that shook the
pane

And rattled at the door. . . .

And now again
He seemed to stand beside the lonely bed
He'd stood beside last night—the old man,
dead,

With staring eyes, dropt jaw, and rigid grin
That held the stark white features, peaked
and thin—

The old man, left alone, with not a friend
To make his body seemly in the end,
Or close his eyes . . .

And then the lusty cry
Of that young baby screaming hungrily
Broke through his dream.

.
The car was running well.
He'd soon be home, and sleeping—till the
bell
Should rouse him to a world of old men
dying
Alone, and hungry new-born babies crying.

THE LAMP

SHE couldn't bring herself to bar the door—
And him on the wrong side of it. Never-
more
She'd hear his footstep on the threshold-
stone. . . .

“You're not afraid to lie all night alone,
And Jim but newly drowned?” they'd asked;
and she
Had turned upon her neighbours wonderingly.
“Afraid of what?” she said. “Afraid of
him,”
The neighbours answered. “Me—afraid of
Jim!
And after all these years!” she cried—“and
he—
How can you think that he'd bring harm to
me?
You know him better, surely, even you!
And I . . .” Then they had left her, for
they knew
Too well that any word that they could say

Would help her nothing.

When they'd gone away,
Leaving her to her trouble, she arose,
And, taking from the kist his Sunday clothes,
Folded so neatly, kept so carefully
In camphor, free of moth, half-absently
She shook them out, and hung them up to
air

Before the fire upon his high-backed chair ;
And then when they were aired she folded
them

Carefully, seam to seam and hem to hem,
And smoothing them with tender hands,
again

She laid them in the kist where they had lain
Six days a week for hard on forty year. . . .

Ay, forty year they'd shared each hope and
fear—

They two, together—yet she might not tend
With loving hands his body in the end !

The sea had taken him from her. And she—
She could do nothing for him now. The sea
Had taken him from her. And nevermore
Might she do anything for him. . . .

The door
Flapped in the wind. She shut and sneaked
it tight,

But did not bolt it. Then she set a light
In the white-curtained window, where it shone
As clearly as on each night that he had gone

Out with the boats in all that forty year,
And each night she had watched it burning
clear,
Alone and wakeful . . . and, though lonelier,
She'd lie to-night as many a night she'd lain
On her left side, with face turned towards
the pane,
So that, if she should wake, at once she'd see
If still her beacon-light burned steadily,
Feeling that, maybe, somewhere in the night
Of those dark waters he could see the light
Far off and very dim, a little spark
Of comfort burning for him in the dark ;
And, even though it should dwindle from his
sight,
It seemed to her that he must feel the light
Burning within his heart, the light of
home. . . .

From those black cruel waters sudden foam
Flashed as she gazed ; and with a shuddering
stir,
As though cold drowning waves went over her,
She stood a moment gasping. Then she
turned
From the bright window where her watch-
light burned
And, taking off her clothes, crept into bed
To see if she could sleep. But when her head
Touched the cold pillow, such hot restlessness
She felt, she'd half a mind to rise and dress

Each moment, as she tossed from side to side.

The bed to-night seemed very big and wide
And hard and cold to her, though a hot ache
Held her whole body tingling wide awake,
Turning and tossing half the endless night.

Then quieter she lay, and watched the light
Burning so steadily, until the flame
Dazzled her eyes, and golden memories came
Out of the past to comfort her. She lay
Remembering—remembering that day
Nigh twenty year since when she'd thought
him drowned,
And after all . . .

She heard again the sound
Of seas that swept a solid wall of green,
Such seas as living eye had never seen,
Over the rock-bound harbour, with a roar
Rushing the beach, tossing against the door
Driftwood and old cork-floats, slashing the
pane

With flying weed again and yet again,
As toppling to disaster, sea on sea
Beneath that crashing wind broke furiously
Almost upon the very threshold-stone
In white, tumultuous thunder. All alone
She watched through that long morn : too
much afraid

To stir or do a hand's turn, her heart prayed
One prayer unceasingly, though not a word

Escaped her lips, till in a lull she heard
A neighbour call out that the "Morning Star"
Had gone ashore somewhere beyond Hell
Scar,

Hard by the Wick, and all . . . and then
the roar

Drowned everything . . .

And how she reached the door
She never knew. She found herself outside
Suddenly face to face with that mad tide,
Battling for breath against a wind that fought
Each inch with her, as she turned north, and
caught

Her bodily, and flung her reeling back
A dozen times before she reached the track
That runs along the crag-top to the Head.
Bent double, still she struggled on, half dead,
For not a moment could she stand upright
Against that wind, striving with all her might
To reach the Wick. She struggled through
that wind

As through cold clinging water, deaf and
blind ;

And numb and heavy in that icy air
Her battered body felt, as though, stark-bare,
She floundered in deep seas. Once in a lull
Flat on her face she fell ; a startled gull
Rose skirling at her ; and with burning eyes
She lay a moment, far too scared to rise,
Staring into a gully, black as night,
In which the seething waters frothing white

Thundered from crag to crag, and baffled
leapt

A hundred feet in air. She'd nearly stepped
Into that gully. Just in time the wind
Had dropt. One moment more, and head-
long, blind,

She'd tumbled into that pit of death . . .
and Jim,

If he were living yet . . .

The thought of him
Startled her to her feet ; and on once more
Against a fiercer wind along the shore
She struggled with set teeth, and dragging
hair

Drenched in the sousing spray that leapt in
air

Spinning and hissing, smiting her like hail.

Then when it almost seemed that she must fail
To reach the Wick, alive or dead, she found
That she was there already. To the ground
She sank, dead-beat. Almost too faint and
weak

To lift her head, her wild eyes sought the
creek ;

But there she saw no sign of boat or man—
Only a furious smother of seas that ran
Along the slanting jetty ceaselessly.

Groping for life, she searched that spummy sea
For sail or sign in vain ; then knew no
more . . .

Till she was lifted by strong arms that bore
Her safely through the storm, lying at rest
Without a care upon her husband's breast
Unquestioning till she reached home, content
To feel his arms about her, as he bent
Over her tenderly and breathed her name.

And then she heard how, back from death,
 he came
Unscathed to her, by some strange mercy
 thrown
Alive almost upon his threshold-stone ;
When, hearing where she'd gone, he'd
 followed her
Hot-foot. . . .

 The breath of dawn began to blur
The shining pane with mist . . . And never-
 more
His foot would follow her along that shore.
The sea had taken him from her, at last,
Had taken him to keep. . . .

 Then from the past
She waked with eyes that looked beyond the
 light,
Still burning clearly, into the lingering night,
Black yet, beyond the streaming window-
 pane
Down which big glistening drops of gentle
 rain
Trickled until they dazzled her ; and she lay
Again remembering—how ere break of day

When she was young she'd had to rise and
go
Along the crag-top some five mile or so,
With other lads and lasses, to Skateraw
To gather bait. . . .

Again her young eyes saw
Those silent figures with their creels, dead-
black
Against the stars, climbing the sheer cliff-
track

In single file before her, or quite bright
As suddenly the lighthouse flashed its light
Full on them, stepping up out of the night
On to the day-bright crag-top—kindling
white,

A moment, windy hair and streaming grass.
Again she trudged, a drowsy little lass,
The youngest of them all, across dim fields
By sleeping farms and ruined, roofless bields,
Frightened by angry dogs that, roused from
sleep,

Yelped after them, or by a startled sheep
That scurried by her suddenly, while she
Was staring at a ship's lights out at sea
With dreaming eyes, or counting countless
stars

That twinkled bright beyond the jagged
scars ;

Or stumbled over a slippery shingle-beach
Beneath her creel, and shuddered at the
screech

And sudden clamour of wings that round her
flapped.

Again she felt that cruel cold ; though hapt
In the big shawl, the raw wind searched her
through

Till every bone ached. Then once more she
knew

Brief respite when at last they reached Skateraw
And rested till the dawn.

Again she saw
Those dark groups sitting quiet in the night
Awaiting the first blink of morning light
To set to work gathering the bait, while she
Sang to them as they sat beside the sea.
They always made her sing, for she'd a voice
When she was young, she had, and such a
choice

Of words and airs by heart ; and she was glad
To turn a tune for any lass or lad

Who'd ask her, always glad to hear them say :
"Come, Singing Sally, give us 'Duncan
Gray,'

'The De'il among the Tailors,' 'Elsie Marley,'
'The Keel-Row' or 'The Wind among
the Barley' "—

And always gladdest when 'twas Jim would ask.

Again, as they would settle to their task
Of gathering clammy mussels, that cold ache
Stole through her bones. It seemed her back
must break

Each time she stooped or lifted up her head,
Though still she worked with fingers raw and
red

Until her creel was filled. But, toiling back,
Staggering beneath her load along the track,
Jim would come up with her and take her
creel

And bear it for her, if she'd sing a reel
To keep their hearts up as they trudged along.
Half-numb with sleep, she'd start a dancing-
song,

And sing, the fresh wind blowing in her face,
Until the dancing blood began to race
Through her young body, and her heart grew
light,

Forgetting all the labours of the night. . . .

Once more she walked light-foot to that gay
air,

The wind of morning fresh on face and hair,
A girl again . . .

And Jim, 'twas always he
Who bore her burden for her. . . .

Quietly

With eyes upon the golden lamp she lay,
While, all unseen of her, the winter day
Behind the dim wet pane broke bleak and
cold.

She seemed to look upon a dawn of gold
That kindled every dancing wave to glee

As she walked homeward singing by the sea,
As she walked homeward with the windy stir
Fresh in her flying hair, and over her
Jim leant—young lucky Jim—a kindly lad
Taking the creel; and her girl's heart was
glad

As . . .

. . . clasped within each other's arms,
the deep
Closed over them . . .

Smiling, she fell asleep.

THE PLATELAYER

TAPPING the rails as he went by,
And driving the slack wedges tight,
He walked towards the morning sky
Between two golden lines of light
That dwindled slowly into one
Sheer golden rail that ran right on
Over the fells into the sun.

And dazzling in his eyes it shone,
That golden track, as left and right
He swung his clinking hammer—ay,
'Twas dazzling after that long night
In Hindfell tunnel, working by
A smoky flare, and making good
The track the rains had torn . . .
Clink, clink,
On the sound metal—on the wood
A duller thwack !

It made him blink,
That running gold . . .
'Twas sixteen hours
Since he'd left home—his garden smelt

So fragrant with the heavy showers
When he left home—and now he felt
That it would smell more fresh and sweet
After the tunnel's reek and fume
Of damp, warm cinders. 'Twas a treat
To come upon the scent and bloom
That topped the cutting by the wood
After the cinders of the track,
The cinders and tarred sleepers—good
To lift your eyes from gritty black
Upon that blaze of green and red . . .
And she'd be waiting by the fence,
And with the baby . . .

Straight for bed

He'd make, if he had any sense,
And sleep the day ; but, like as not,
When he'd had breakfast, he'd turn to
And hoe the back potato-plot—
'Twould be one mass of weeds, he knew.
You'd think each single drop of rain
Turned as it fell into a weed ;
You seemed to hoe and hoe in vain.
Chickweed and groundsel didn't heed
The likes of him—and bindweed, well,
You hoed and hoed, still its white roots
Ran deeper. . . .

'Twould be good to smell
The fresh-turned earth, and feel his boots
Sink deep into the brown, wet mould
After hard cinders. . . .

And, maybe,

Open for them : so snug and warm
They slept or chattered, while he stood
And faced all night that raking storm—
The little house beside the wood
For ever in his thoughts, and he
Not knowing what was happening. . . .

But all went well as well could be
With Sally and the little thing ;
And it had been worth while to wait
Through that long night with work to do,
To meet his mother at the gate
With such good news, and find it true,
Ay, truer than the truth.

He still
Could see his wife's eyes as he bent
Over the bairn . . .

The Devil's Ghyll
Had done its worst, and he was spent ;
But he'd have faced a thousand such
Wild nights as thon to see that smile
Again, and feel that tender touch
Upon his cheek.

'Twas well worth while
With such reward. And it was strange
The difference such a little thing
Could make to them—how it could change
Their whole life for them, and could bring
Such happiness to them, though they
Had seemed as happy as could be
Before it came to them.

The day
Was shaping well. And there was she
The lassie sleeping quietly
Within her arms, beside the gate.

The storm had split that lilac-tree ;
But he was tired, and it must wait.

MAKESHIFTS

AND after all, 'twas snug and weather-tight,
His garret. That was much on such a night—
To be secure against the wind and sleet
At his age, and not wandering the street,
A shuffling, shivering bag-of-bones.

And yet
Things would be snugger if he could forget
The bundle of old dripping rags that slouched
Before him down the Canongate, and crouched
Close to the swing-doors of the Spotted Cow.
Why, he could see that poor old sinner now,
Ay, and could draw him, if he'd had the
knack

Of drawing anything—a steamy, black
Dilapidation, basking in the glare,
And sniffing with his swollen nose in air
To catch the hot reek when the door swings
wide

And shows the glittering paradise inside,
Where men drink golden fire on seats of plush,
Lolling like gods: he stands there in the
slush

Shivering, from squelching boots to sopping
hat

One sodden clout, and blinking like a bat
Bedazzled by the blaze of light ; his beard
Waggles and drips from lank cheeks pocked
and seared,

And the whole dismal night about him drips
As he stands gaping there with watering lips
And burning eyes in the cold, sleety drench,
Afire with thirst that only death may quench.

Yet he had clutched the sixpence greedily,
As if sixpennyworth of rum maybe
Would satisfy that thirst. Who knows ! It
might

Just do the trick perhaps on such a night,
And death would be a golden, fiery drink
To that old scarecrow. 'Twould be good to
think

His money 'd satisfied that thirst, and brought
Rest to those restless, fevered bones that ought
Long since to have dropped for ever out of
sight.

It wasn't decent, wandering the night
Like that—not decent. While it lived it
made

A man turn hot to see it, and afraid
To look it in the face lest he should find
That bundle was himself, grown old and
blind

With thirst unsatisfied.

He'd thirsted, too,
His whole life long, though not for any brew
That trickled out of taps in gaudy bars
For those with greasy pence to spend !

The stars
Were not for purchase, neither bought nor
sold
By any man for silver or for gold.

Still, he was snug and sheltered from the
storm ;

He sat by his own hearth secure and warm,
And that was much indeed on such a night.
The little room was pleasant with the light
Glowing on lime-washed walls, kindling to
red

His copper pots, and, over the white bed,
The old torn Rembrandt print to golden
gloom.

'Twas much on such a night to have a room—
Four walls and ceiling storm-tight overhead.
Denied the stars—well, you must spend instead
Your sixpences on makeshifts. Life was
naught

But toiling for the sixpences that bought
Makeshifts for stars.

'Twas snug to hear the sleet
Lashing the panes and sweeping down the
street

Towards Holyrood and out into the night
Of hills beyond. Maybe it would be white

On Arthur's Seat to-morrow, white with snow—
A white hill shining in the morning glow
Beyond the chimney-pots—that was a sight
For any man to see, a snowy height
Soaring into the sunshine. He was glad,
Though he must live in slums, his garret had
A window to the hills.

And he was warm,
Ay, warm and snug, shut in here from the
storm.

The sixpences bought comfort for old bones
That else must crouch all night on paving-
stones
Unsheltered from the cold.

'Twas hard to learn
In his young days that this was life—to earn
By life-long labour just your board and bed—
Although the stars were singing overhead,
The sons of morning singing together for joy
As they had sung for every bright-eyed boy
With ears to hear since life itself was young—
And leave so much unseen, so much unsung.

He'd had to learn that lesson. 'Twas no
good

To go star-gazing for a livelihood
With empty belly. Though he had a turn
For seeing things, when you have got to earn
Your daily bread first, there is little time
To paint your dream or set the stars to
rhyme—

Nay, though you have the vision and the
skill

You cannot draw the outline of a hill
To please yourself when you get home half
dead

After the day's work—hammers in your head
Still tapping, tapping. . . .

Always mad to draw
The living shape of everything he saw
He'd had to spend his utmost skill and
strength

Learning a trade to live by, till at length,
Now he'd the leisure, the old skill was dead.

Born for a painter, as it seemed, instead
He'd spent his life upholstering furniture.
'Twas natural enough men should prefer
Upholstery to pictures, and their ease
To little coloured daubs of cows and trees.
He didn't blame them, 'twas no fault of theirs
That they saw life in terms of easy-chairs,
And heaven, like that old sinner in the slush,
A glittering bar upholstered in red plush.

'Twas strange to look back on it now, his
life . . .

His father, married to a second wife ;
And home, no home for him since he could
mind,

Save when the starry vision made him blind
To all about him, and he walked on air

For days together, and without a care. . . .
But as the years passed, seldomer they came
Those starry, dazzling nights and days aflame,
And oftener a sudden gloom would drop
Upon him, drudging all day in the shop
With his young brother John—John always
 gay,
Taking things as they came, the easy way,
Not minding overmuch if things went wrong
At home, and always humming a new
 song. . . .

And then she came into his life, and shook
All heaven about him. He had but to look
On her to find the stars within his reach.
But, ere his love had trembled into speech,
He'd waked one day to know that not for
 him
Were those bright living eyes that turned
 dreams dim—
To know that, while he'd worshipped, John
 and she
Had taken to each other easily. . . .

But that was years ago . . . and now he sat
Beside a lonely hearth. And they were fat—
Ay, fat and old they were, John and his
 wife,
And with a grown-up family. Their life
Had not been over-easy : they'd their share
Of trouble, ay, more than enough to spare :

But they had made the best of things, and
taken

Life as it came with courage still unshaken.

They'd faced their luck, but never gone half-
way

To meet fresh trouble. Life was always gay
For them between the showers : the roughest
weather

Might do its worst—they always stood
together

To bear the brunt, together stood their
ground

And came through smiling cheerfully. They'd
found

Marriage a hard-up, happy business

Of hand-to-mouth existence more or less,

But taking all in all, well worth their while

To look on the bright side of things—to smile

When all went well, not fearing overmuch

When life was suddenly brought to the touch

And you'd to sink or swim. And they'd
kept hold,

And even now, though they were fat and old,
They'd still a hearty grip on life. . . .

They'd be

Sitting there in their kitchen after tea

On either side the fireplace even now—

Jane with her spectacles upon her brow,

And nodding as she knitted, listening

While John, in shirt-sleeves, scraped his
fiddle-string,

With one ear hearkening lest a foot should
stop
And some rare customer invade the shop
To ask the price of that old Flanders chest
Or oaken ale-house settle. . . .

They'd the best
Of life, maybe, together. . . .

And yet he,
Though he'd not taken life so easily,
Had always hated makeshifts more or less,
Grudging to swop the stars for sixpences,
And was an old man now, with that old
thirst

Unsatisfied—ay, even at the worst
He'd had his compensations, now and then
A starry glimpse. You couldn't work with
men

And quite forget the stars. Though life was
spent

In drudgery, it hadn't only meant
Upholstering chairs in crimson plush for
bars. . . .

Maybe it gave new meaning to the stars,
The drudgery, who knows!

At least the rare
Wild glimpses he had caught at whiles were
there

Yet living in his mind. When much was
dim,

And drudgery forgotten, bright for him
Burned even now in memory old delights

That had been his in other days and nights.
He'd always seen, though never could express
His eyes' delight, or only more or less ;
But things once clearly seen, once and for all
The soul's possessions—naught that may befall
May ever dim, and neither moth nor rust
Corrupt the dream that, shedding mortal dust,
Has soared to life and spread its wings of gold
Within the soul. . . .

And yet when they were told,
These deathless visions, little things they
seemed,
Though something of the beauty he had
dreamed
Burned in them, something of his youth's
desire. . . .

And as he sat there, gazing at the fire—
Once more he lingered, listening in the gloom
Of that great silent warehouse, in the room
Where stores were kept, one hand upon a
shelf,
And heard a lassie singing to herself
Somewhere unseen without a thought who
heard,
Just singing to herself like any bird
Because the heart was happy in her breast,
As happy as the day was long. At rest
He lingered, listening, and a ray of light
Streamed from the dormer-window up a
height

Down on the bales of crimson cloth, and lit
To sudden gold the dust that danced in it,
Till he was dazzled by the golden motes
That kept on dancing to those merry notes
Before his dreaming eyes, and danced as long
As he stood listening to the lassie's song. . . .

Then once again, his work-bag on his back,
He climbed that April morning up the track
That took you by a short cut through the
wood

Up to the hill-top where the great house
stood,

When suddenly beyond the firs' thick night
He saw a young fawn frisking in the light :
Shaking the dew-drops in a silver rain
From off his dappled hide, he leapt again
As though he'd jump out of his skin for
joy.

With laughing eyes, light-hearted as a boy,
He watched the creature unaware of him
Quivering with eager life in every limb,
Leaping and frisking on the dewy green
Beneath the flourish of the snowy gean,
While every now and then the long ears
pricked,

And budding horns, as he leapt higher,
flicked

The drooping clusters of wild-cherry bloom,
Shaking their snow about him. From the
gloom

Of those dark wintry firs, his eyes had won
A sight of April sporting in the sun—
Young April leaping to its heart's delight
Among the dew beneath the boughs of
white. . . .

And there'd been days among the hills, rare
days
And rarer nights among the heathery ways—
Rare golden holidays when he had been
Alone in the great solitude of green
Wave-crested hills, a rolling shoreless sea
Flowing for ever through eternity—
A sea of grasses, streaming without rest
Beneath the great wind blowing from the
west,
Over which cloud shadows sailed and swept
away
Beyond the world's edge all the summer day.

The hills had been his refuge, his delight,
Seen or unseen, through many a day or
night.

His help was of the hills, steadfast, serene
In their eternal strength, those shapes of green
Sublimely moulded.

Whatsoever his skill,
No man had ever rightly drawn a hill
To his mind—never caught the subtle curves
Of sweeping moorland with its dips and
swerves—

Nor ever painted heather. . . .

Heather came
Always into his mind like sudden flame,
Blazing and streaming over stony braes
As he had seen it on that day of days
When he had plunged into a sea of bloom,
Blinded with colour, stifled with the fume
Of sun-soaked blossom, the hot, heady scent
Of honey-breathing bells, and sunk content
Into a soft and scented bed to sleep ;
And he had lain in slumber sweet and deep,
And only wakened when the full moon's light
Had turned that wavy sea of heather white ;
And still he'd lain within the full moon blaze
Hour after hour bewildered and adaze
As though enchanted—in a waking swoon
He'd lain within the full glare of the moon
Until she seemed to shine on him alone
In all the world—as though his body 'd grown
Until it covered all the earth, and he
Was swaying like the moon-enchanted sea
Beneath that cold, white witchery of light . . .
And now, the earth itself, he hung in night
Turning and turning in that cold, white glare
For ever and for ever. . . .

She was there—
There at his window now, the moon. The
sleet
And wind no longer swept the quiet street.
And he was cold : the fire had burnt quite
low :

And, while he'd dreamt, there'd been a fall of
snow.

He wondered where that poor old man would
hide

His head to-night with thirst unsatisfied. . . .

His thirst, who knows! but night may
quench the thirst

Day leaves unsatisfied. . . .

Well, he must first
Get to his bed and sleep away the night,
If he would rise to see the hills still white
In the first glory of the morning light.

1914-16.

THE END

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